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THE WALL STREET BLOOD; or, Tick Tick, the Telegraph Girl.

BY ALBERT W. AIKEN,

AUTHOR OF "OVERLAND KIT," "ROCKY MOUNTAIN ROB," "KENTUCK, THE SPORT," "INJUN DICK," "CAPTAIN DICK TALBOT," "GOLD DAN,"
"TALBOT OF CINNABAR," "RED RICHARD," "KIT CARSON, KING OF GUIDES," ETC., ETC.



"DON'T YOU DARE TO ATTEMPT TO RESIST OR I'LL MAKE IT HOT FOR YOU!" CRIED THE DETECTIVE, WORKING HIMSELF INTO A PASSION AND SWINGING THE CLUB THREATENINGLY.

The Wall Street Blood;

OR,

Tick Tick, the Telegraph Girl.

BY ALBERT W. AIKEN,

AUTHOR OF "A STRANGE GIRL," "THE DOUBLE
DETECTIVE," "LA MARMOSET," "OVER-
LAND KIT," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE TELEGRAM.

WITHIN the small telegraph office, situated in a corner of one of the ferry-houses that dot the shore line of New York's great city, sat the operator in charge, a young and pretty girl, listlessly engaged in watching the human life-tide streaming through the building.

The girl was quite a picture as she leaned on the little counter and gazed through the glass which separated her from the outer apartment.

She was small in stature, slight in figure, with a little round, dark face, illuminated by a pair of most brilliant violet eyes; her hair was jet-black, and curled in little crispy ringlets all over her head.

And yet, attractive as was the picture she presented, hardly one in a hundred of the throng hurrying for the ferry-boat as though their lives were in peril, took the slightest notice of her, and of the few who happened to glance in at the girl, none paused for a second look.

She was pretty enough, but she was "only a telegraph girl," plainly clad, and a servant of the great public at large, for a modest stipend per week. But that passing throng would have bowed down and worshiped her rare beauty had she been robed like one of the queens of fashion.

The multitude passing through the ferry-house was increasing in numbers, for the evening was at hand, and the thousands who worked in the city but lived without its limits were hieing to their homes.

And the young girl, all alone in the world, with neither kith nor kin, felt strangely lonesome as she looked upon this army of workers, all hastening homeward, and nearly every other one carrying a parcel.

"All have homes, loving friends, something to live for—all but I, unfortunate, ill-starred Frances Carden," she murmured. "But I forget; I live for vengeance!" And fierce was the tone in which she uttered the words. "Vengeance on the man who has wronged me so deeply. I am sure the avenging fates will some day bring me to him and nerve my weak, girlish arm to strike him as terrible a blow as the one which he dealt me in the long ago."

These meditations were interrupted by the rapid approach of a gentleman, young, tall, handsome, elaborately dressed, and with the unmistakable air of a person on the best of terms with fortune.

A costly diamond glittered in his scarf and upon his little finger he wore a gem which would have caused even the eyes of a diamond-broker to sparkle.

The girl, with the instinctive love of her sex for all such trinkets, looked with admiration upon the brilliants, hardly noticing the wearer, as she took her place, ready to receive his orders.

He took one of the telegraph blanks, drew out an elegant gold pencil and hurriedly traced a few words upon the paper.

"Will you put that right through for me, please?" he said.

A long-drawn breath came from the girl's lips, and only by the greatest effort was she able to repress a cry of surprise, but so great was the emotion under which she labored, that she did not dare to trust herself to speak, so simply nodded.

But the gentleman, evidently somewhat excited, did not notice the girl-operator so the nod escaped him, and thinking that she had not heard him, he spoke again:

"What is the matter? Are you deaf?" he exclaimed, impatiently. "I asked you if you could put this message right through. It's for Washington, and I want an answer right away."

"Yes, sir," she said, her voice low, yet calm, despite the tumult raging in her breast.

And gazing at the man, as she spoke, the gentleman had a good view of her face, but only to start as though he had received an electric shock.

"Mildred Dockall alive!" he cried, with trembling voice, his face growing white.

There was a look of amazement also upon the features of the telegraph girl, but no signs of fear such as the man betrayed.

"Sir!"

"You, alive!" he repeated.

"I believe so," and the girl laughed.

A puzzled expression appeared upon the face of the man. He surveyed the girl with an intensely earnest look, but she, now perfect mistress of her emotions, only betrayed the sur-

prise that any one would feel at being thus oddly accosted by a stranger.

"I thought you were dead!"

"Haven't you made a mistake? Haven't you confounded me with somebody else?"

"Your name is Mildred Dockall?"

"No, sir; my name is Frances Carden, at your service," and she smiled, as if wholly unconcerned.

"You are trying to deceive me! You are Mildred Dockall; I am sure of it. I cannot be mistaken!"

"As I have been in the employ of the telegraph company quite a long time any of the officers will tell you that my name is Frances Carden. Some of the operators have named me Tick Tick, but that isn't like the name by which you addressed me," still smiling complacently.

The gentleman had been closely scrutinizing the girl's face. Ten years had passed since he had last looked upon it, if she was the person he took her to be; the girl of fifteen then would be a woman of twenty five now, but this girl did not appear to be so old; the hair of the one whom he had known was of the color of beaten gold and rippled in shining masses clear to her waist, but the locks of this maiden were dark as the raven's wing, and curled in clustering ringlets close to her head. Her complexion, too, was dark—as dark as the skins of Italy's swarthy children—a strong contrast to the clear red and white complexion of the lovely English girl, a perfect specimen of the Anglo-Saxon beauty. In figure, though, this girl exactly resembled the English Mildred, and she had her violet eyes—eyes so wondrously luminous that the man found it hard to believe there could be two such orbs elsewhere in the world.

But, if she was the English girl why should she deny the fact? he asked himself; she would, indeed, be more likely to overwhelm him with a storm of reproaches, reviving the bitter memories of the past, than to deny her identity.

For once in his life Almon Dudley—for so this tall, handsome fellow was called—was "off his guard," the unexpected sight of those brilliant eyes had for the moment disconcerted and alarmed him; but now he was himself again, and mentally cursed his stupidity in betraying his astonishment and suspicions.

"Ah, well, perhaps I am mistaken," he confessed; "but you look very much like a lady I used to know, and as I had heard of her death it was but natural that I should be surprised."

"Yes, sir," and then, as is customary, she read aloud the dispatch which the gentleman had written:

"Miss Madelaine Durang, Willard's Hotel, Washington, D. C. She will come to-morrow night. Return immediately to prepare. A. DUDLEY."

A frown passed over the face of the man as the thought occurred to him that he had been rash in signing his name to the dispatch if the telegraph girl was really the person he thought her to be, for that was not the name he bore at the time of the acquaintance with Mildred, and if she was, indeed, Mildred, he had given her a clue to work upon if she bore him ill will for the deeds done in the past; and if she did not feel a mortal enmity toward him, then her disposition was more angelic than human.

"Your address, sir, please?"

The man was watching the operator narrowly. Not a sign betrayed her recognition of him as an old acquaintance; so she must be a stranger to him and his past.

"You need not trouble yourself to take my address; no answer is required," he replied; then he paid for the message and sauntered away.

"More mischief!" Tick Tick murmured, her eyes blazing; "but she, whoever she may be, that is to come to-morrow night, shall not be entrapped if I can prevent it! for I feel sure there is villainy in this order to Madelaine Durang."

CHAPTER II.

A MISSING GIRL.

"It is the hand of fate itself that has brought us together," the girl continued, "and for what other purpose than for me to execute upon him the vengeance for which I have thirsted for so long a time! And he recognized me, too, despite the change in my appearance; his guilty conscience was alarmed; but I think I played my part successfully, and though he suspects I am the Mildred Dockall whom he so fearfully wronged, ten years ago, yet he is not sure of it."

Then her thoughts reverted to the costly manner in which he was dressed.

"Times have gone well with him lately," she thought. "That is evident from his appearance. He doesn't look much like the shabbily-dressed fugitive who fled in the night to avoid the officers of an enraged law. So much the better: the greater his elevation, the more terrible the fall when I tear from beneath his feet the scaffold of lies upon which he stands and hurl him down amid the ruins."

Her eyes at this moment fell upon the dispatch, and her lip curled as she noted the signature.

"Another alias, not like the one he bore when I knew him. Possibly since that time he has had a dozen. And this woman, Madelaine Durang—that is a French name. She is at Willard's Hotel, Washington; that gives me a clew through which I can reach Almon Dudley. There is mischief in the air! I am sure of it, for this man is the arch minister of evil. 'Return to prepare!' Prepare what?—a snare? Undoubtedly. But I will take a hand in the game!"

She sat down and sent off the message. Hardly was this accomplished when she was "called" from the central office. The other operator telegraphed that he had an important message for her, which was to be held until called for, and for her to use great care in taking it down.

This was something so out of the common run of business that the girl's curiosity was excited, so every sense was on the alert when this message came:

"PLATTSBURG, N. Y., May 1st, 1882.

"To JOHN HENRY DAILY, Telegraph Office,—Ferry, New York city:—

"Janet O'Dare has secretly fled. Cannot get a clew, but think to New York. Employ detectives. Give full description; spare no expense. She is the heiress of a million. The truth has been kept from her by dead father's wish. Have a suspicion she susp. cts. At any cost she must be found before she comes of age, six months hence. Am searching for her in this neighborhood, and leave city to-day. Draw on me for funds, and telegraph any news instantly. (Signed) ABRAHAM DAILY."

It was a long message, but under the circumstances that was not strange.

After the girl had read it all carefully, and made the usual copy, which she prepared for the coming of the customer, a wild and most improbable idea came into her head.

"What if this missing girl—this heiress of a million, who was supposed to have fled to the city, should be the one that Almon Dudley referred to in the telegram?" she thought.

The idea was absurd—far-fetched, and could only have occurred to a nervous and excited woman; but, though she strove to banish it, she was unable to do so, for it returned to her again and again.

"A girl worth a million of dollars would be a prize which would stimulate this man to exercise his bold, bad genius to its utmost. He would run any risk—dare almost any danger to secure such booty, and if I could foil him, oh! what a triumph it would be! I must keep my eyes open, for though it is an improbable supposition, stranger things by 'ar have happened."

At this moment, a telegraph messenger-boy came into the office. It was the lad attached to the station. He was a bright little fellow, with a round, chubby face, rosy with health, keen gray eyes, and a shock of rebellious brown hair that insisted upon standing upright in the most extraordinary manner. He was fifteen years old, but so small in stature that few would have taken him to be over ten.

William Woolley was his name, but habit had abbreviated it into Willy Wool, and he was never called anything else.

Willy was an orphan, without a relative in the world, and a thorough New York boy. Cast upon the world by the death of his parents at an early age, he had commenced life as a newsboy; then had graduated into a bootblack, and from that into a telegraph messenger, being naturally shrewd and smart and pretty well informed for a lad who had been knocking about in the streets all his life. He had many good qualities, and was well liked by all who knew him.

Willy and Miss Carden had been companions in this office for quite a time, and a fast friendship had grown up between them.

"Hi, Frankie, what do you think?" the boy exclaimed, in his off-hand, familiar way as he came into the office.

"Think about what?" she asked, roused from the reverie into which she had fallen by his entrance.

"Such a lark! My! you're a beauty. I know, but I didn't think you had such a swell for a feller."

"What are you talking about?"

"Don't you know?"

"Indeed I do not."

"Have you got a feller and don't know it?"

Miss Carden laughed, for she thought the boy was at one of his jokes.

"Oh, you needn't laugh; I guess you know all about it!"

"All about what?"

"Why, that elegant swell who takes such an interest in you, and he ain't got no diamonds either, oh, no! Regular sparklers; put your eyes out, you know; big as walnuts; heap of style, you bet!"

"I haven't the remotest idea of what you are talking about."

"Well, you've got a feller if you don't know it, and he's a stunner too, I tell you."

"Explain, for I really don't understand you at all."

"Hain't you seen a good-looking feller, all dressed up to kill, hanging 'round here?"

In an instant the memory of the man whom she hated so bitterly came back to her.

"There was a gentleman here a few minutes ago who sent a dispatch, and I believe he was dressed handsomely and wore diamonds."

"He's the man, and you captured him for all he's worth."

"Nonsense!"

"Oh, it's the truth! Wish I may die if it isn't. I met him up the street, and he beckoned me to come with him into a corner, so he could talk to me, you know, without any one overhearing. Then he said that I looked as if I was sharp, and I told him I ate razors for breakfast every morning. Don't ketch me asleep, you know, unless you get up precious early. He grinned and said I was a bully boy, and I up and told him I was a daisy. Then he showed me a dollar and asked me if I would like to earn it, and I said I would go for it so quick that it would make his head swim."

"You are never backward about using your tongue," the girl observed with a smile.

"It's all the capital I've got just now, and I believe in making the most of it. Then, after he showed me the dollar he told me that I could not only make one but five if I had sense enough to keep a still tongue in my head, and I just allowed that I could be as dumb as an oyster if I was paid enough for it. Then he up and told me what he wanted. The fact is he is dead gone on you, and I am to find out all about you, what your name is—where you live—whether you are married or not, where you came from, and how old you are, and everything, and I am not to let you know a thing about it."

"And yet you have come and told me everything, you foolish boy!"

"Do you think I am going back on an old pard like you just for his dirty dollars?" the boy demanded, in indignation. "Do you think that is the kind of a grasshopper I am? No, sir-ee, ma'am! Why, I didn't let on that I knew you at all. I said you was a girl that I wasn't very well acquainted with. But I tell you, Miss Frankie, I reckon you have struck a streak of luck, for this fellow has got the rocks."

"Do you know anything about him?"

"On, yes; it ain't the first time I have seen him. He's got an office in Wall street, or, anyway, he's in an office down there, for I remember carrying a message to him once, and I spotted his diamonds then."

"Willy, can I trust you with a secret?" asked the girl, earnestly.

"Well, you can just bet your boots you can, and you will win every time. You see, you have been good to me, and there ain't so many who have been good to me in this world that I can afford to forget any of them."

"You are a good boy and I know I can trust you. I have reason to believe that this man, so far from being an admirer, is a deadly enemy, and he wishes to gain information in regard to me for the purpose of doing me an injury."

"Nary word will he get out of me, then!"

"Oh, yes; you must give him a full account, but I will tell you what to reveal to him."

"That's bully! You are going to play 'possum'?"

"Exactly; and while he thinks he is entrapping me I will entrap him."

"It will be the biggest thing out."

"Together I am sure we will be more than a match for him."

"You can count on me, tooth and toe-nails!"

"This man is an infamous scoundrel, crafty as he is cruel; but justice is on my side, and in the end I am sure to triumph."

"I'm with you, clear through!" the boy declared.

CHAPTER III.

THE BELLE OF THE BINDERY.

A BUSY scene, the folding-room of John Jefferson Walaker's mammoth book-bindery, situated on one of the bustling down-town streets of Gotham, sacred to trade.

A half hundred girls were all at work, busy as bees, and the way the printed sheets were manipulated by their expert fingers was a sermon to idlers.

Walaker's establishment was one of the largest of its kind in the city, and employed quite a small army of working people of both sexes.

Walaker himself was a pompous man of fifty, of great wealth, but of vast ignorance, except in the art of money-getting; and like most men of his class, was a perfect slave to gold and valued it above everything else. To his equals he was affable and pleasant; to his superiors, cringing and subservient; but to his employees and those whom he considered beneath him in the social scale, he was overbearing, dogmatic and insolent. Another peculiar point about the master of the bindery was his desire to appear young. His hair on head and face was a rusty gray naturally—he wore a full beard—but in order to disguise his age he kept both hair and beard constantly dyed brown. This he did not attend to as diligently as he should, and as the hair would grow, his hirsute decorations generally presented a streaked and altogether unlovely appearance. His face, too, showed its

age plainly in every feature, so this attempt at deception rarely succeeded in deceiving anybody.

Strong contrast to the proprietor of the establishment was the foreman, Martin Walaker, a nephew of the old man—a well-built, rather good-looking young man, except that he had a dark face, with a firm mouth and sharp eyes, which indicated the man of much energy and decision.

As we have stated, there were about fifty girls in the room, all skilled workers, and tolerably good looking, for it was old Walaker's boast that he had the prettiest "gang" of working-girls in the city, and he often declared that he wouldn't have an ugly girl in the place, as she spoilt the appearance of his establishment!

Brisk and bright as so many birds, these girls were a pleasant sight to look upon, although dressed in the common robes of toil.

But there was one among them who would have attracted the eye of even a careless observer by her rare beauty.

Esther Leigh, the girl was called, and lovely indeed was her oval face, with its pure red and white complexion, hair the tint of fresh-mined gold, eyes darkly blue and as lustrous in their light as the shimmering waves of a fathomless, sunlit ocean. She was a little above the medium height and gave promise of one day developing into a Juno-like woman, a queenly creature, such as men delight to fall down and worship.

Esther Leigh was a new girl—a stranger to all in the bindery. A sudden press of work had occurred; Walaker had advertised for girls, and among the multitude who had applied came Miss Leigh.

The book-binder had been impressed with the looks of this applicant upon the instant, and after a few inquiries had engaged her. She was, she stated, a stranger in the city, an orphan, and having been suddenly, without warning, thrown upon her own resources, had come to New York, trusting to secure some employment by which to procure a livelihood.

She had been a month in the bindery; this was the last Saturday of the month, and the special work for which the extra hands had been employed being completed they had all been notified that their services would not be further required.

All except Esther; not a word had been said to her, and great was the envy that raged in the breasts of the other extra girls when they learned this fact.

Miss Leigh was not a favorite with the majority; they said she was proud and "stuck up," chiefly because she was very quiet, attended diligently to her work and was not inclined to be familiar and free with the rest. Her remarkable beauty, too, had something to do with this dislike. Then, too, both of the Walakers, foreman and proprietor, treated her with a consideration which they did not extend to the oldest hand in the place.

This was quite enough to make the work-girls talk, and with their sly and malicious insinuations they could have made the position of Miss Leigh very unpleasant if she had been of the kind who could be worried in such a way; but she was not. She pursued her toil with calm unconcern, totally indifferent to the conversation of her companions.

As the afternoon wore away, and the time for suspending work came near, one of the girls—who was at the same table as Miss Leigh, an extra who had, with the rest, received notice—could not help flinging a last malignant shaft at the beautiful worker.

"How lucky it is to be a beauty and put on airs!" she remarked, without looking at, or addressing her conversation to anybody in particular. "Oh, dear! I wish I was good-looking!" and she was really pretty, this girl, and knew it well enough, too, despite her affected ignorance. "It doesn't matter how well you work, you know; that hasn't anything to do with it, girls; as long as you are a *fascinating* creature, that is all that is required; then you can keep your place—that is, if you care to keep it under *such* conditions—I don't, for one; I wouldn't stay a minute; I should be ashamed."

For the first time Miss Leigh condescended to notice an attack, but this was so bitter and brutal that, despite her composure, it called up a vivid blush in her cheeks.

"Miss Jones, I presume you are striking at me," she said, raising her head and looking the angry girl full in the face, an expression in the deep blue eyes which made the other feel very uncomfortable, and almost wish that she hadn't been quite so severe and personal in her remarks. "And I think you are betraying a very mean spirit, indeed. I do not know that I am to be retained; nothing has been said to me on the subject, but if I am, perhaps it will be because I attend to my work and do not waste my time in wounding those who have never injured me."

"Miss Jones, have the kindness to put on your things, go to the office, get your money, and get out!" cried the stern voice of the young foreman, who had approached unperceived and overheard the conversation. "And don't ever

trouble yourself to again apply here for work. We don't care to have mischief-makers and scandal-workers in this establishment."

The girl turned red with anger, sprung to her feet and opened her mouth as though about to reply, but the flashing eyes of the foreman were upon her, and he was quick to assume the offensive.

"Now don't say anything ugly, or you may be sorry for it. You know the rules here; no talking allowed, and least of all, such mischief-making talk as you have indulged in. I don't want to report you, as it is your last day, but I will not submit to any insolence."

The girl hesitated for a moment; then curbing her temper with a great effort, she turned upon her heel with a contemptuous snarl and a disdainful toss of the head. She did not dare to give vent to the angry words which burned upon her tongue, for she was only a poor girl, greatly in need of money, and could not afford to risk the loss of any part of her wages. Old Walaker had been known to fine his employees heavily for very slight infractions of his rules—fined them and kept the money!

Just then the whistle sounded, the signal for stopping work; all the girls quitted the tables, exchanging significant glances as they did so. The little incident which had just occurred only confirmed the opinion which they had previously entertained, that the new-comer was the first favorite in that establishment.

The foreman took advantage of the movement to speak to Miss Leigh.

"Mr. Walaker wishes you would have the kindness to come in last for your money, as he wants to speak to you, and he will not be able to do so until the others are gone."

"It has come at last," thought the girl to herself. "He is offended at the way in which I have worked, and wishes to scold and perhaps fine me when he discharges me."

Little could she afford to lose any of her wages just then, and in spite of her attempt to appear unconcerned, an anxious expression came over her face as she nodded and turned away to get her things.

She purposely delayed in putting them on, so that all of the girls were out of the room by the time she was ready.

Young Mr. Walaker was lingering near the door, and as she passed him with a bow and a sweet "Good night, sir," he said, hastily:

"Gold amounts to something in this world, but it isn't everything; just remember that; and don't forget, too, that there never was a woman who sold herself yet who did not live to repent of the bargain!"

Strange words, at which Esther Leigh marveled.

CHAPTER IV.

A COOL PROPOSITION.

If she had had any idea of asking him to explain what he meant, he frustrated it by walking away; so she went into the office where the master of the establishment, having finished giving the girls their money—it was his boast that he always handled his own cash—was waiting for her.

"The foreman gave you my message, I suppose?" he said, nodding to her familiarly, while a smile appeared upon his fat features, from which the girl took heart; her employer would not smile if he intended to deprive her of any part of her scanty and hard-earned wages.

"Yes, sir."

"And delivered it with a very bad grace, I'll be bound, the young puppy!" the smile giving way to a frown.

"I—no, sir, I think not. I did not notice anything unusual in his manner," replied Miss Leigh, astonished at the remark, and hardly knowing what to say.

"The young puppy!" repeated the proprietor. "When I was a young man, young men knew their places and kept them; but nowadays, the moment they discover their beard growing they think they ought to be boss. The confounded rascal! I would kick him out of this in a minute if I could only get some one to run the business as he does for anything like the money; but I cannot, and he knows it, the scamp! and that is why he dares to presume to interfere in my personal affairs."

She listened in amazement to this revelation of the private affairs of the concern.

"I suppose you and he are on very good terms, eh?" he asked, suspiciously, fixing his little gray, pig-like eyes searchingly upon the girl's face. "Paid you a good deal of attention, hasn't he?"

"No, sir; not that I am aware."

"Oh, he's a sly customer: he has been feeling his way cautiously so as not to alarm you, but I am up to his tricks, and when I made him carry my message to-day, I knew it was gall and wormwood, but it serves him right; what business had he to think of such a thing?"

The poor girl was in utter darkness as to the meaning of all this, and could only listen.

"Here's your money, by the by," he remarked abruptly, happening to catch sight of the envelope inscribed with her name lying upon the desk.

"And now, sit down," he continued—after the

girl, with a bow and a murmured "thank you," had taken the envelope—and he pushed a chair toward her. "I wish to have a few minutes' serious conversation with you."

Miss Leigh sat down rather reluctantly, for she did not fancy the old taskmaster.

"Let me see; you are an orphan, I believe, Miss Leigh?"

"Yes, sir."

"And you haven't any immediate relatives, if I understand correctly?"

"Not that I know of, sir."

"And a stranger in the city, too, probably with very few friends or acquaintances."

"Almost without friends, sir."

"Dear me, dear me! That is so sad, a young and beautiful girl—a charming person like yourself, so well fitted to adorn—to brighten any home. It is really pathetic. I have been thinking over your case to day, and I have come to the conclusion that really I ought to do something for you. It is my duty as a man to look out for such a helpless, tender, beautiful creature as yourself, and I intend to do it."

A strange look appeared upon the girl's face, and a light shone in her eyes of commingled curiosity and surprise. What did this all portend?

"The bindery is no place for you, you know," he continued. "You are fitted by nature to shine in a brighter sphere, and I have thought that I might be able to make room for you in my own house. I suppose you are not aware that my wife is a confirmed invalid, but she is. Now, although I have been in active business-life for a number of years, I am still a comparatively young man, but my wife is a very old woman, some ten years older than I. She was a widow when I married her, and although there neither remarkable for her youthfulness nor good looks, yet, as she possessed this business—I was the foreman and ran the whole machine—I swallowed the pill for the sake of the gilding. It was a small concern, but with her money and my experience it expanded into what it now is—one of the largest and most profitable establishments of the kind in the country. You see it was merely a marriage of convenience on both sides; there wasn't any love about the matter at all. I married her because she had a fine business, and she wedded me because she knew that if she didn't have any one to attend to it but a man on salary, the business would speedily go to the dogs. I understood the concern and could manage it. It was really a sort of legal copartnership, and I am proud to say that we have got on splendidly together. In fact, since the day of our union we have never had a serious quarrel, and that I guess is a great deal more than most couples who have married out of pure love can say!" and he smiled complacently while he mopped his bald pate with his handkerchief.

His hearer listened with increasing surprise, still mystified as to the object of this strange communication.

In a moment he resumed, his face growing serious:

"But now I see the end is approaching. My family physician has warned me to be prepared for the worst. At the very outside, he says, he does not believe it will be possible for my wife to last the year out, and, in fact, he would not be surprised at her dying at any time," and he paused in his speech as if moved by the impending calamity.

Although at a loss to understand why her employer should so far unbend from his usually arrogant dignity as to reveal to her his family affairs, yet his hearer had become interested in the story and could not help sympathizing with the afflicted lady.

"It is very distressing, sir," she observed.

"Yes, yes, very distressing," he replied speaking in the most matter-of-fact way. "But, you see, my dear girl, I have been used to it so long; three or four years ago, at least, the doctor announced to me that he couldn't help my wife at all; her case was beyond the reach of medicine, and that it was only a question of time. Nature would struggle bravely, of course, but at last would be obliged to give in. So you see I have come to look forward to it as a matter which could not be averted. Now, you know how I am situated. I want you, you know as a sort of companion of my wife. Of course, in reality, being a helpless invalid who spends most of her time in bed, and already provided with a competent nurse, you will not be called upon to trouble yourself very much about her. In fact, I want you to take charge of the household, and see that I am made comfortable. I am a wealthy man, you know, my dear girl, and money is no more to me than so much water when I take a whim in my head. You have impressed me wonderfully; you are the handsomest girl, I think, I have ever met, and I have made up my mind to look after you in the future."

As he made this declaration the man of wealth leaned back in his arm-chair, stuck his thumbs in the arm-holes of his vest, and swelled out pompously, a smile of condescension upon his features.

Of course he expected the helpless orphan to be duly grateful for the offer, and was prepared

to request her to be sparing of her thanks, but to his amazement Miss Leigh grew white as death; her eyes flashed until they looked almost black; and as she rose from her chair her lips were trembling with excitement.

"There! there! don't get nervous over the matter; it's nothing, you know," he protested, noticing her agitation, which, in his stupidity, he attributed to her gratified surprise at his magnificent offer. "You are a charming creature, and I am proud to be able to take you from this miserable life and place you in a station which you will adorn."

"It is honest, though, and there is no disgrace in honest toil," the girl retorted, finding her speech at last, but her voice trembled with indignation as she spoke.

"But it is ridiculous that such a girl as you should work for a paltry five or six dollars a week! Why, I will give you hundreds if you want 'em!" he cried, loftily.

"But I do not want them! I do not want a single penny that I do not earn by honest toil!" and drawing her figure up to its fullest height she gazed at the old fool with eyes that fairly blazed with her womanly resentment and scorn.

Walaker now comprehended that the girl was not only going to decline his offer, but considered herself insulted by the proposal, and he was both astonished and enraged.

"By Jove! young woman, you are crazy, I believe!" he spluttered.

"Not so crazy as to sell myself to you, no matter how high you may bid!"

"Oh, you have misunderstood me!"

"But I speak so plainly that you will not misunderstand me! You have grossly insulted me; you are a mean, contemptible old villain, no matter how much money you have, and I thoroughly and utterly despise you!" And with the air of a queen she moved toward the door, leaving the bindery monarch for a moment speechless with passion. But as she crossed the threshold he managed to recover the use of his tongue.

"You are an impudent jade!" he exclaimed, hoarse with his rage, "and don't you ever dare to come here again. I would have been your friend—your protector; I would have done everything for you—married you, perhaps, one of these days, if you were a good girl and had sense enough to know on which side your bread was buttered; but now you have made me your enemy, and I will do everything I can against you; I will follow you up; I will hunt you down and crush you! I tell you I will make you repent the day that you dared to brave my anger."

"I am not afraid of your malice," the brave girl returned, turning in the doorway and facing him proudly; "and as to again returning to this place, all the money in the world would not induce me to accept employment from you. I would rather beg my bread from door to door, or starve in the streets, than to accept money from you, even though it was in payment for honest labor. Do your worst, sir! I both despise and defy you!"

Before the old man could frame an answer the girl was gone; and well, too, it was for her, for her ears would have been most sadly shocked by the torrent of curses that came from the lips of the baffled rascal.

"I'll make her repent it!" he cried, amid his curses; "I'll make her repent every insolent word in tears of blood! She shall rue the day that she dared to defy me! I'll have a watch kept upon her; I'll spend a thousand dollars if necessary to disgrace the minx before all the world!"

With a high-beating heart and a face flaming scarlet when she thought of the mortifying offer, the girl passed down the stairs into the street.

At the door waited the foreman of the bindery, young Walaker.

A single glance at the agitated face of the girl was sufficient to give him an idea of what had occurred. From what his uncle had said he suspected why an interview with the young woman was desired, and now he saw that it had been a stormy one.

"Now comes my chance," he muttered.

CHAPTER V.

HONEST WORDS.

"You have quarreled with Mr. Walaker, I take it," the foreman said, as the maiden emerged into the street.

She started at being addressed, for she had been so preoccupied with her thoughts that she had not noticed the young man standing by the doorway.

The foreman had not favored her in the least, nor paid her any particular attention, yet had always treated her with scrupulous politeness; although, when not observed, he had feasted his eyes upon her rare beauty.

"If you have no objection I will walk a little way with you," he continued. "I have an idea that I will not see you here any more and would like to say a few words to you."

The girl shot a quick, suspicious glance at the young man. Did he, too, believe, because she was poor and without friends, that she would

fall an easy prey to any designing hawk who cared to swoop down upon her?

But there was an honest look to his face—an expression which was reassuring; so she did not hesitate to grant his request.

"Am I right in my supposition that you will not come to the bindery any more?" he asked, as they walked on together.

"Yes, sir."

"I suspected as much; then, Miss Leigh, I presume I will not have the pleasure of seeing you again."

"I presume not, sir," and there was a tinge of sadness in her voice.

"Unless, indeed, you are willing to continue the acquaintance by permitting me to call upon you," with entreaty in his eyes as he made the remark.

Miss Leigh was confused; she was reluctant to refuse the request, yet felt that she must.

"I am afraid I cannot ask you to come. There is such a difference in our positions, and then I am afraid it would not be right. It might give rise to unpleasant remarks."

"Your will shall be as law to me; yet I regret deeply that I cannot enjoy the pleasure; and now, Miss Leigh, will you pardon me if I seem to interfere in matters that apparently do not concern me? My excuse must be that I take a great interest in you and would be very sorry if you do not prosper in the world, as I am sure you deserve. I saw you walking with a gentleman, last evening."

A bright flush swept rapidly over the fair face, which young Walaker noticed with a sad heart. It confirmed him in his suspicion that she regarded the gentleman with more than a friendly interest.

"Yes, I was out walking last evening," she murmured.

"Will you pardon an abrupt question? Are you well acquainted with that gentleman?"

"I—I suppose so." She was evidently ill at ease.

"I ask the question because he appeared last night so different from what he usually does. I have seen him often, dressed in the most costly manner, blazing with diamonds as is customary with successful men of his class; he is a Wall street man, I believe, and yet last night he was dressed in the soberest and plainest attire."

"I have never seen him dressed otherwise."

"And is he not in Wall street?"

"I believe he has an office there."

"Miss Leigh, I will speak my thoughts frankly; I believed that this man was playing a part; I was not sure that you knew who and what he really was, and I thought it was my duty to speak to you in regard to the matter. You are young and innocent, a stranger in the city, and it is impossible for you even to suspect the existence of the many pitfalls which, in this modern Babylon, are laid to ensnare the feet of the unwary. This gentleman did not impress me favorably, and I thought it but right to put you on your guard."

A cold, haughty look appeared upon the beautiful face, and the young man guessed that, perverse after the fashion of her sex, his advice had been badly received.

And why should it not have been when she wore in her bosom, next to her heart, the picture of the man of whom he spoke, and cherished his loved image in her mind as that of the one dearest in all the world?

"I am much obliged for the trouble you have taken, and I will be on my guard, although I do not agree with you in the estimate you have formed of the person; still, I am not wise, and I may be mistaken. Now I will bid you good-day, thanking you again, and trusting that at some future time we may be able to renew our acquaintance."

He was dismissed, and there was no alternative but to submit, so he returned her salutation and halting, allowed her to proceed alone.

"I have angered her," he thought. "She loves this fellow then, and walks deliberately into the snare with her eyes open! Perhaps, though, he means her no evil—but he *does*!" he added aloud, vehemently. "I am certain of it! I read evil in that man's face as he gloated upon the beauty of the girl, as plainly as though it was written there in words. He had marked her for his prey, and she, poor innocent! is angry with me because I doubt this villain; but with the aid of Heaven I will save her, despite herself!"

Firmly was the vow registered in the heart of the young man; and, luckily, he had means which enabled him to prosecute the task.

Miss Leigh went on her way, her heart throbbing with agitation. She had rather grown to like the foreman, but this attack upon the man who was to her above all others, excited her indignation, and yet she could not help confessing that Mr. Walaker had some slight grounds for his suspicion.

Her hero had been playing a part, for he had made known to her that very day that he was other than he seemed, and she had promised to go with him that night for the purpose of being introduced to his sister, his only living relative as he informed her.

It was the old story that he had told her: he

wished to be valued for himself alone, and so he concealed the fact that he moved in the best circles in New York, and was rated as one of the rising men of the city when he made her acquaintance.

Miss Leigh boarded in Market street near East Broadway, and by the time she had reached the house she had succeeded in calming her agitation.

At seven her escort was to call for her, and until seven came the minutes seemed to go by with leaden feet.

Promptly to the moment, though, the gentleman appeared.

As the reader has doubtless surmised it was Almon Dudley, but the gentleman presented an entirely different appearance now from what he did when he sent the telegraph dispatch, being plainly attired in a dark suit which betrayed signs of long wear, looking like an overworked and underpaid clerk.

"I am all in readiness, you see, and will not keep you waiting," she said, greeting him with a beaming smile. Her hat and cloak were at hand, and she immediately proceeded to put them on.

Then they sallied forth. Proceeding to the Bowery they took a Third avenue car and rode up-town.

At Fortieth street they alighted and walked through Lexington avenue.

Miss Leigh had never asked any questions, and when her lover told her that he held a better position than his garb indicated, and that he resided in Lexington avenue, she was not betrayed into the surprise which she would most surely have felt if she had known that he resided in one of the most fashionable quarters of the city. But when she came to the avenue, and turned into it, she could not help expressing her amazement at the elegant mansions.

"The *creme de la creme* of the city dwell here," he replied, "but among all the belles who queen it over the fashionable world, there is not one to compare with a certain young lady who honors me with her acquaintance."

Sweet as sweetest honey were these words of praise from the lips of the man who had won her young affections, and the girl blushed to her very temples, giddy with happiness.

"This is my home," he said, as he halted before one of the handsomest houses in the block; a magnificent brown-stone mansion, through the curtained windows of which poured a flood of mellow light.

"It is beautiful," the girl observed, so full of happiness that all seemed like a dream.

Within the mansion she was received by a charming woman, a dark-faced, dark-haired, raven-eyed beauty, with a decidedly foreign aspect, whom the gentleman introduced as his sister, Madelaine, and who embraced her with warm affection, and then carried her off to remove her things.

The gentleman sunk into an easy-chair, radiant with satisfaction.

"She is here at last!" he cried. "It was an easy game, and I have won it with scarcely an effort. She is mine, and what power in this world, either human or divine, can snatch her from me?"

The door being open, a well-drilled servant made bold to enter.

"If you please, sir, there's a messenger-boy at the door who insists upon seeing you in person," he said.

CHAPTER VI.

A MYSTERIOUS MESSAGE.

THE servant was the personification of a menial—smooth-faced, velvet-footed, obsequious in manner, humbleness itself in everything.

"Why didn't you bring the dispatch?"

"He wouldn't give it to me, sir; he said his orders were to deliver it to you in person."

"What's the matter—what is up now, I wonder?" the young master muttered, a shade of anxiety passing over his face. "Well, show him in, Jackson."

The servant bowed, retreated, and then speedily returned with the messenger-boy.

The dispatch bearer was a lad of fifteen or sixteen apparently—swarthy-faced and rather stolid-looking.

He opened his book and tendered Dudley a telegram in an envelope, which that gentleman immediately tore open, for an apprehension of coming danger had suddenly seized upon him.

He read the message over twice, unable to comprehend it. It said:

"Things are O. K. Back the mare for all you are worth."

It was signed "G. M.," and dated at Saratoga.

"What the deuce does this mean?" he exclaimed. "I don't know anything about any mare. I am not a betting man."

The servant had been all ears, and he shook his sleek head solemnly, for the remark had been addressed directly to him.

Dudley then looked for the address and discovered that both telegram and envelope bore simply the number of his house and the name of the street.

"What were your instructions in regard to this dispatch?" he asked.

"To give it to the gentleman himself," replied the boy in a husky tone, as though he was laboring under a bad cold, and while he spoke his eyes were wandering around the luxuriantly-furnished apartment as though he was unused to such magnificence.

Dudley watched the boy narrowly for a moment, and then he made an almost imperceptible sign to the servant, calling his attention to the lad, and the man immediately commenced studying the boy, with a sort of a cat-like scrutiny.

"Some mistake; this dispatch is not for me."

"Ain't I got the right number?" asked the lad, listlessly, holding out his dirty hand for the message and apparently not caring whether he had or not.

"The number is all right but the message is not for me. There is a mistake about the number or the street."

"You don't want to pay for it, I s'pose?" remarked the messenger.

"Certainly not; take it back to the office and tell them that I don't know anything about it."

"Yes, sir," and the boy replaced the telegram in its envelope, put it in his book and sauntered out.

The man, Jackson, followed at his heels.

"Queer thing, isn't it?" he observed, in his soft, insinuating way, as he hastened to open the door.

"Werry rum!" confessed the boy.

"Try next door below, or the house above."

"Not much! This is the number, and if it ain't right back it goes to the office."

"You're a smart chap!" exclaimed the man, in a tone of profound admiration. "I tell you what it is, a man would have to get out of bed mighty early in the morning to get ahead of you. Have a cigar?"

"Don't care if I do," accepting the proffered "weed."

"I'd be proud to know you, blessed if I wouldn't. You are a regular out-and-outer! Say, what is your name?"

"William Woolley, *exquire*, and don't you forget it!" And the messenger drew a match from his pocket and scraping it alight on the leg of his pantaloons in a peculiarly dextrous manner, proceeded to enjoy the cigar.

"Well, now that is a red-hot name, and I'll bet a dollar it ain't every man can pull the wool over your eyes."

"Not much!"

"What office do you come from?"

"Western Union."

"Of course I know that, but what particular office?"

"All over," replied the boy, with a wink, and puffing a cloud of smoke into the face of the seeker-after-knowledge.

"Now you are trying to run a rig on me. I'll bet you came from the Fifth Avenue Hotel!"

"If you put your ducats on that lay you will be cleaned out before you can say Jack Robinson," the boy retorted. "But, I say, old Skeeks, I can't stand here chinning with you all night. I speck I'll catch fits, now, when I get back to the office for being away so long. Got any more cigars that you are hungry to give away?"

"Not just now, but if you will drop in tomorrow any time, if you happen to be passing this way, maybe I will be able to rake up another, and if the boss ain't 'round maybe a glass of wine or two."

"You're a brick of the first water! Oh, you can bet I won't forget to remember to come in! So-long, old man!" and the lad descended the steps.

The servant watched which way he went, and then returned hurriedly to his master.

"It is a 'plant,' eh?" cried Dudley, anxiously, perceiving by the expression upon the man's face that something had occurred to alarm him.

"I am afraid it is; hadn't I better put the Terrier on the track?"

"Is he down stairs?"

"Yes, sir, and all right, too; he hasn't been on the lush for a week."

"Stopped drinking, eh?"

"Yes, sir; I told him right out that he must stop, or else we would throw him overboard."

"Set him on the track at once! I don't understand what the game is, but some mischief is afoot, I am sure, and it is better to be prepared for it than be caught napping."

Jackson hurried away to the lower region.

In the kitchen, nodding in an old rocking-chair before the fire, was a little, dried-up-looking man, the appearance of whose head strongly reminded one of a rough-haired terrier dog. This was the man-of-all-work attached to the Dudley mansion, Johnny Smirk by name, but by a certain number of people he was never called anything but the Terrier.

The man was wide awake in an instant after Mr. Dudley's valet entered the room, showing that like his namesake, the dog, he was always on the alert.

Briefly Mr. Jackson explained what was wanted.

"A telegraph boy has just left the house, and the master thinks there is something wrong about him, and I myself feel pretty sure that it is a plant. He went down the street. Follow, and don't lose sight of him until you find out what he is up to!"

"All right, my covey! I'll fly like a bird!" And the man caught up his hat, and hurried out of the house.

He crossed to the opposite sidewalk, and walked rapidly, southward. This movement was to prevent the messenger from suspecting that he was being watched if he was on the alert for anything of the kind.

At the corner of the cross street, the spy halted for a moment, and looked up and down. His idea was that the boy would be more apt to turn toward Broadway than to Third avenue, as the nearest telegraph office that he knew of was situated on the first-named thoroughfare.

Sure enough:—down the cross street, progressing toward Broadway, he thought he could distinguish the slight figure of the messenger-lad.

Again he crossed to the opposite side of the street and followed in pursuit.

Straight to the telegraph office on Broadway he tracked the lad, entered immediately behind him and heard him make his report.

"Gentleman at No. — Lexington avenue, says he don't know anything about this message; 'tain't for him, and he wouldn't pay for it."

Thus assured that he had got hold of the right boy, the Terrier proceeded to find out all he could about him.

There were two or three boys lounging around the place, and for a man of the spy's abilities it was an easy matter to get into conversation with one of them and learn all the particulars about the messenger.

And when he had ascertained all that could be learned he returned to report.

Dudley had been waiting impatiently, and to the master the spy told the tale.

"It's all right and reg'lar, gov'nor, as far as I kin see," the Terrier announced. "The kid is a sure-enough messenger-boy, and the dispatch wasn't no hocus game, 'cos I see'd him give it back to the boss and report that you said it wasn't for you and wouldn't pay for it. The kid's name is Willy Woolley, and he has been a messenger-boy 'bout a year, but has been running for one of the down-town offices."

"I would have bet a thousand dollars that there was something wrong about the matter!" Dudley exclaimed. "My instinct seldom deceives me, and the moment I opened the dispatch something whispered to me that danger threatened. I never had a presentiment prove false yet."

"There has got to be a first time, you know, gov'nor," the Terrier suggested.

"Yes, that is true enough, and perhaps I am getting overcautious. Well, let the matter pass for the present."

But the animal like instinct of the master was correct. Danger did threaten him:—the telegraph-boy that the Terrier tracked was not the one who had delivered the message.

Boy No. 1 delivered the dispatch; boy No. 2 was in waiting around the corner of the street in a snug nook. No. 1 passed around the corner, jumped into the shelter of the doorway, No. 2 came out and walked down the street.

It was a clever trick and deceived even so shrewd a rascal as the Terrier.

No. 1 received from No. 2 an ulster overcoat which, when put on, enveloped him from head to heels, and now, with a powerful night-glass in his hands, he was posted on the stoop of one of the opposite houses, busily engaged in playing the spy, in turn.

CHAPTER VII.

COMING TO AN UNDERSTANDING.

THE way in which affairs were progressing did not at all please Mr. Almon Dudley, and he felt decidedly out of temper, although he prided himself upon the composure with which he met all chances of fortune in life, were they good or bad.

It was not alone the ill-success of the Terrier's mission which had annoyed him, but there had been a stormy interview between himself and his "sister," and as the particulars are of importance to our tale we must relate them.

As we have said, Miss Madelaine conducted the visitor to her dressing-apartment up-stairs; and, all smiles and sweetness, pressed her to lay aside her things and make herself at home as fervently as though she was the girl's dearest friend.

Then, pretending to suddenly remember that something required her immediate attention, the woman excused herself, said she would return in a few moments and hurried down, entering the parlor just after the Terrier had been dispatched upon his mission.

Dudley was leaning back in his easy-chair, his brow knitted in thought, when the lady entered, but the moment he looked up he saw the storm that threatened, for the face of the woman was dark with rage.

"Oh, she is a beauty, is she not?" she cried,

her accents hoarse with passion. "I am so mad with rage that I could break everything to pieces!" And, suiting the action to the word, with her pretty foot she kicked a little ornamental chair that stood in her way half across the floor.

"If you are going to make a scene hadn't you better close the doors, unless, indeed, you are anxious to have all within the house know that you are making a fool of yourself," Dudley remarked, perfectly calm, and yet with a look in his eyes that plainly betrayed the storm of passion raging within his heart.

"What do I care who hears me? I am reckless! I am desperate! I do not care what happens or what becomes of me! I could find it in my nature now to play the role of Samson and tear down the pillars of the temple of lies wherein we live, even if like him I should be buried amid the ruins!"

With fine tragic force she declaimed the sentence, assuming the pose of a dramatic queen.

The valet, Jackson, attracted by the noise made by the fallen chair, appeared in the doorway, thinking that, possibly, his services were needed. But the instant he perceived the woman, and overheard the closing part of her speech, despite the control which he had over his features, a scowl appeared on his face.

"Jackson, have the kindness to shut the doors," Dudley ordered, with perfect sangfroid; "Miss Madelaine is going to show that she has not forgotten her early training, and is about to oblige me with a scene from the Rival Queens, or some other masterpiece of the French dramatists."

"I hate that man!" the woman cried, impulsively. "He is like a snake; he crawls about in silence and in secret, but is full of venom, and when he strikes, death will come."

Jackson paid not the least attention to this, but proceeded to carry out the master's order.

But, after the doors were closed, so that those within the parlor were secure from observation, alone in the entry he shook his clinched fist in menace toward the parlor door.

"You malignant devil! you female fiend! you will get us all hung one of these days, if we are not careful!" he muttered. "You are right about one thing, though; if it was a question between your neck and mine, I would blab on you in an instant, if I could save my own life by the operation. The master is crazy to submit to this imp's caprices! Bah! I would end it, and speedily, too! What is the use of living with a tigress, no matter how beautiful she is, if there is danger that some day she may turn and rend the hand that caressed her? A wise man would slay the creature; and women, when they get their temper up, are as dangerous as tigers, and as little likely to listen to reason."

Then with a very gloomy face he sat down by the front door, to wait the Terrier's return.

After Jackson had closed the doors, Dudley, in the coolest possible manner, drew out his cigar case, selected a "weed" and a match, the woman watching him with eyes that fairly seemed to blaze with passion.

The cigar lighted, the gentleman leaned back in the easy-chair, and remarked:

"Now fire away! I perceive that you have got your ugly up, and I suppose you intend to make it lively for me during the next half-hour; but, let me beg of you to be as quick about it as possible, for the young lady up-stairs will doubtless become impatient."

"Do you dare to mention her to me?"

"And why not?"

"Oh, you are as cold as ice! Do you not see that I am burning up with anger?"

"Certainly; I am not blind; no one ever accused me of being so."

"This girl is the most beautiful one my eyes ever looked upon."

"Exactly my idea, and I am glad to see that you agree with me."

"And you dare to tell me so?"

"Why not?"

"Ah!" Upon a little table, just within reach of her hand, was an ivory paper-knife, a delicate toy, but the angry woman caught it up and brandished it as if it had been a veritable dagger.

"If that was a bit of cold steel, now, a prudent man wouldn't give much for my life," he remarked, blowing a cloud of smoke with superb valour right up in her face.

"You are right, and it is lucky for you that it is not a dagger!" And, with the word, she snapped the paper-knife in twain and threw the pieces violently from her.

"Come Madelaine, let us have an end to this nonsense," he remarked. "Keep these tragic airs until you return to the boards of the Grand Opera; then they will come in play, and the curled and scented darlings, who fill the boxes, will split their gloves with their enthusiastic applause. Upon me, though, they are wasted. Leave heroics alone and come down from the clouds to the pain of common sense. What is the matter with you? Why have you flown into this violent passion all of a sudden? You knew the girl was coming; you knew that, in order to lull suspicion, it was resolved you should be introduced as my sister—a half-sister, the same father but different mothers, so that

your being known as Madelaine Durang, while I am called Almon Dudley, would be accounted for on reasonable grounds. You knew, too, that the girl had been brought here for a motive; there wasn't any fun about the matter, but business from the word go."

"But I did not dream she was so beautiful," the woman persisted.

"What does it matter whether she is as beautiful as an angel or as ugly as Satan?" he asked.

"To me it matters much. She is to become your prey, but from what I have seen of her I feel satisfied she can only be conquered in one way."

"My own idea, I presume; I must marry her."

"Yes, and why do you marry her?"

"You have just said why—to win her, of course."

"Because you are in love with her—ah! miserable woman that I am to make such a discovery!" and she wrung her hands in real misery.

"But you haven't made any such discovery! That is only your imagination. You are like all the rest of your sex, fanciful in the highest degree."

"If it is not the truth why do you not satisfy me then with a full explanation and so relieve the anxiety that devours me?"

"My dear girl, there are some things in this life which it will not do to talk about. I have a certain scheme to carry out—a scheme devised by myself, and of which no one else has the slightest knowledge. Now, if I reveal this scheme to you, I am just superstitious enough to believe it will knock the whole thing into a cocked hat."

"And why should it?" the woman demanded, not at all satisfied by the explanation. "You have always made me your confidante—you have never hesitated to trust me before, and why is it that you choose to keep this particular matter to yourself?"

"Because there is a woman in the case," he replied, bluntly. "And from long experience I know that your sex is not to be trusted in such a case. Already you have given me proof that my judgment is correct by flying into this passion. Never before have I known you to be betrayed into any such excitement."

"And what am I made of, then?" she cried, grinding her teeth with suppressed rage. "Do you think I am made of stone?"

"Oh, no; flesh and blood, and a most charming piece of nature's handiwork."

"Ah, you think by empty compliments to turn me from my purpose; but you will not. I shall not rest satisfied until I learn all the details of your scheme."

"You are unreasonable, but I will not attempt to argue with you, because I know by experience that it would only be a waste of time. The nature of the scheme I can explain to you, but you already know it. I intend to marry this girl."

"But you are already married to me! You will not dare to cast me off!"

"Do I not put myself completely in your power by marrying this woman? Can you not send me to State Prison for bigamy if you choose?"

"Yes, yes; and I would do it if you attempted to play me false."

"I have not the least doubt of it," he responded, dryly; "but if the time ever comes for an explosion, I have an idea that none of us will escape the consequences. The reasons for my scheme I cannot give you, but you must be patient and allow it to go on."

"Very well; so long as you keep faith with me well and good; but if you deceive me you will repent it!"

And with this threat the woman withdrew.

CHAPTER VIII.

AN UNWELCOME VISITOR.

THE expression upon the face of Dudley changed the moment the door closed behind the form of the woman; a black cloud of anger swept over it, and he shook his finger warningly toward the door.

"Have a care, my beauty!" he muttered, "have a care! I am not the most patient man in the world, and when I strike the blow is always sure to be felt. You must not attempt to play the queen with me; you are but a servant and must obey. If she is content to do as I bid her we may get on together for some little time, although I begin to weary of her, for these fits of passion are very tiresome; but if she attempts to brave me I will crush her with as little ceremony as though she was but a crawling worm beneath my feet."

As will be readily understood, the schemer was not in a good humor, and when the Terrier returned and told the tale of his failure, his master's vexation increased.

He was fated, too, to undergo yet another trial of his patience that evening.

After the Terrier had finished his recital and departed, Jackson came in with the message that a gentleman was at the door who desired

to see the master of the house on particular business.

"Anything wrong?" Dudley inquired, quickly, a shade of anxiety upon his countenance.

"Oh, no, sir; I think not. He's a gentleman—no police spy. I asked him his name, but he said it did not matter as he was a stranger to you and you wouldn't be any the wiser for knowing it."

"Some advertising solicitor or genteel beggar, I suppose. Why didn't you try to get rid of him?"

"I did, sir. I said I wasn't sure whether you had come or not, but he was up to me, and replied that he had noticed you when you had entered the house, and if you would have the kindness to grant him an interview, he would detain you but a few minutes."

"The quickest way to get rid of him will probably be to see him."

"That is what I thought, sir."

"Show him in, if you are certain there isn't any trap about it."

"I don't think there is; besides, no one is 'wanted' for anything, just now."

"Very true, but these mines that the police explode, go off so deuced sudden and unexpected sometimes, that the first thing a man knows about it is when the catastrophe occurs."

Jackson nodded assent, withdrew, and in a few moments returned, conducting a well-dressed, gentlemanly-looking young man.

The first glance assured Dudley that the servant was correct in saying there was nothing suspicious about the gentleman, nor did he in the least resemble the neatly-attired bores who follow gentlemen into the privacy of their homes to "talk business."

"Mr. Almon Dudley?" queried the visitor.

"Yes, sir," replied the other, whose keen discernment had detected something in the manner of the stranger the reverse of friendly.

"I presume there is no danger of our conversation being overheard?"

"Not the slightest, sir," replied Dudley in a tone which plainly said—"state your business and get out as quickly as possible."

"My errand is a rather peculiar one, and it is really difficult for me to find words to explain."

"In that case, sir, suppose you retire without troubling yourself further in the matter," observed the master of the mansion, harshly. In some unaccountable way he had taken a most decided dislike to the visitor.

The other was nettled by the tone and replied haughtily:

"From the manner in which you speak I should judge, sir, that you had an inkling in regard to the nature of my business."

"My time is too valuable to waste in idle guesswork. Have the kindness to explain yourself immediately or else retire."

"I come in reference to a lady now under your roof."

The blow was an unexpected one, but Dudley was such a perfect master of himself that he never even winced.

"Well, sir, what of the lady?"

"You do not deny that she is here, I perceive?"

"As you seem to know all about the matter it would be useless for me to deny, so we will assume that the lady to whom you refer is here, and now have the kindness to go on."

"I wish to know what your intentions are in regard to her."

Dudley stared at the questioner for a moment in a quizzical manner, and then burst into a loud laugh.

"Well, upon my word, I must say this is the richest joke of the season! Of all the cool impudence I ever encountered this is the most complete!" Dudley declared.

"You will answer me though," the other remarked quietly, yet with a threatening look in his dark eyes.

"Will I?" and Dudley answered the glance with one equally as threatening.

"I think I shall be able to find a way to make you."

"I wouldn't advise you to venture much wealth upon that, for you would be certain to lose. Who are you, sir, that presumes to interfere in this matter? What tie of kindred do you bear to this lady, or by what authority do you act?"

"I am her friend, and a true one, too, as any one who attempts to wrong her will find."

"The days of chivalry have surely come again!" Dudley remarked, with a sneer. "The only trouble is in this prosaic age the man who attempts to imitate King Arthur and his gallant knights by doing doughty deeds in behalf of distressed damsels is so little appreciated that he is generally hurried to the nearest mad-house as a dangerous lunatic, unfit to be at large."

"Before you get through with me, sir, you will find that I am anything but crazy. I have entered this house to-night with the purpose of learning what your intentions are to that lady, and I give you fair warning I do not intend to depart until I succeed in that design."

Again Dudley laughed, for the idea really amused him. The game was so completely in

his hands that he felt he could afford to be merry at the expense of the intruder, whom he set down for a rival, mad with jealousy.

"Now see what a good-natured fellow I am to submit to this sort of thing," he exclaimed. "I listen to you patiently, as hardly one man out of a hundred would be apt to do, instead of calling my servants and having you ejected from the house. You demand to know what my intentions are in regard to a certain young lady and yet admit that you haven't any right to interfere in the case. Although I was at first inclined to treat your demand with the contempt which it deserved, yet, believing that I can get rid of you more quickly and with less trouble by giving a full explanation, I have concluded to do so; but in the first place I must know who you are, and also be satisfied that the lady who is at present under my protection is the one to whom you refer."

The easy and confident manner of the speaker had due effect upon the intruder, for it seemed to indicate that Mr. Almon Dudley was not afraid of interference.

The conditions were reasonable ones, and the stranger hastened to comply.

"The lady to whom I refer is Miss Esther Leigh."

"You are correct then in assuming that she is in this house and under my protection."

"And my name is Martin Walaker."

Dudley elevated his eyebrows; all was plain to him now. This was the foreman of the bindery in which the girl had been employed—a would-be rival; and Dudley laughed in his sleeve when he reflected how little he had to fear from him. The schemer had taken pains to ascertain all about the girl's surroundings, and through his agents had heard all the idle gossip of the bindery.

"Well, Mr. Walaker, if I understand you aright, as a friend of Miss Esther Leigh you are desirous of knowing why that lady has accepted the hospitalities of this mansion?"

Walaker bowed assent.

"She is here, sir, the guest of my sister, as my betrothed wife."

The young man looked amazed.

"Your betrothed wife!" he exclaimed, as if unable to believe he had heard rightly.

"Yes, sir; and if you doubt the assertion, it will be an easy matter for me to summon the lady, and allow her to confirm the statement."

Walaker seemed for a moment dazed, like a man who had received a heavy blow. The intelligence was so entirely unexpected; that a man like Almon Dudley, whom he had learned was a prominent "operator" in Wall street, and popularly supposed to be a millionaire, should deign to marry a poor and friendless girl, even though she was as beautiful as Venus herself, seemed utterly improbable, and yet it was not impossible.

Dudley watched the face of the young man closely, and easily guessed his thoughts.

"If you doubt me, say the word and I will summon the lady."

Walaker felt that he had thrust himself into a false position, and that the quicker he retreated from it the better. He was fairly sick at heart, too, when he reflected that the girl was lost to him forever.

"I will not put you to that trouble, sir, for I have no doubt you speak truly. I trust you will pardon this intrusion; all I can say in excuse is that I am a true friend to the lady, and would risk my life freely at any time to protect her from harm. Good-evening, sir!"

And the young man, with a melancholy air, bowed himself out, Dudley scowling after him in angry menace.

CHAPTER IX.

AT THE ALTAR.

As usual, the catlike Mr. Jackson had been on the alert, and no sooner had he shown the young foreman out than he hastened to his master in the parlor.

"Did you overhear what this fellow wanted?" Dudley demanded, when the servant made his appearance.

"Every word," and Jackson shook his head in a rather doleful way.

"What is the matter with you? Why do you shake your head after that fashion?"

"This young lady is not so friendless as we thought."

"Oh, this fellow doesn't amount to anything."

"He may amount to enough to give us trouble in the future."

"Jackson, you are always crossing bridges before you come to them. This fellow is a soft-headed idiot who has been captivated by the pretty face of the girl, and I have no doubt that just as long as he thought there was any chance of getting her for himself, he would be sure to keep his eyes open, but my announcement that I intended to marry her upset him completely. Why, you ought to have seen his face change! I tell you it was a regular knock-down blow. At one fell stroke I shattered all his hopes."

"For the present I have no doubt you have succeeded in throwing him off the track, but I

am looking ahead, you know; the time will come, of course, when this lady will be apt to be an incumbrance, and then will it not be awkward to have such a gentleman as this ready to espouse her cause?"

"Always borrowing trouble, eh?" Dudley remarked, with a light laugh.

"Isn't it better to be prepared for such things than to have them come upon you with the suddenness of a thunder-clap out of a clear sky, taking you entirely by surprise?"

"Yes, yes, I grant you; but you are too suspicious. In the first place, I calculate it will take about six months to get tired of the lady, and when that time comes, and I conclude to leave her, I shall take the precaution to carry her off to some distant point—across the water, probably—where she will not be apt to secure the meddlesome assistance of this love-sick fool, no matter how earnest he is in his desire to aid her."

"I am glad that you have looked ahead so as to avoid trouble, for I think, sir, this young man is one who would make matters warm for us if he once got fairly started on the scent."

"Don't be alarmed; my marrying the girl puts a ring in his nose which will prevent him from rooting into my affairs. But there is another point which I have had in view. It is possible that I may not want to get rid of the lady at all. If I can succeed in molding her to my purpose what a magnificent aid she will make, eh?"

"Beautiful! but I am afraid you will have a hard time; and then, to consider, sir, two women in the house, each one striving to be the mistress, for it is as natural for a woman to desire to rule as it is for her to live; will it not be apt to lead to an explosion that will ruin everything?"

"Upon my word, Jackson, you are the longest-headed fellow I ever met!" exclaimed the master-spirit, again laughing. "You would make a capital pilot, for you are always on the lookout for rocks ahead."

The servant showed his teeth in a quiet sort of grin, the nearest approach to merriment in which he ever permitted himself to indulge.

"Well, well, sir, if I didn't keep my eyes open we wouldn't be where we are now."

"A truer word was never spoken, old fellow!"

"And two women, you know—two jealous cats ready to fly at each other, and tear and claw at the slightest provocation! how can any one tell but in some angry fit one of the two may not take it into her head to turn upon us? Such things have been known to happen, sir."

"Oh, yes; there is no disputing that; history is full of such instances, and history is always repeating itself; but, Jackson, old fellow," and here he approached the servant and brought his mouth close to the ear of the other, "I do not intend that there shall be two jealous, fighting women in my household. With one woman as mistress I shall have all I can do to get along; two, I am sure, would bankrupt me of my little stock of patience."

The servant nodded sagely; he understood the plan that his master had in his head, and heartily approved of it.

"You'll have to work it very nicely, sir, for the old one is a very fiend, and would think no more of putting a knife into you than of eating her dinner. Besides, there would be danger, too, of her denouncing us."

"I shall take all necessary precautions, Jackson, to keep her from doing any harm. She has begun to show her teeth, and in my opinion, a woman is like a dog; the moment either begins to get ugly, the quicker they are got out of the way the better."

"Right, sir, quite right!" Jackson declared, emphatically.

"And now, in regard to this marriage; it is my idea the quicker it is hurried forward the better."

"Yes, sir; I do not see that anything is to be gained by delay."

"I may have some little trouble in winning the girl's consent; but I do not anticipate any, although the suddenness of the event may surprise her, but she is so much attached to me that I feel pretty certain she will yield to my wishes in the matter, and once the ceremony is completed, Mr. Martin Walaker, or anybody else, may go hang for all I care. The girl will be mine, and I will be master of the situation."

Dudley was not a man to let the grass grow under his feet when he had once made up his mind; so, on that very evening he began operations.

It was not a difficult matter to persuade a girl so blind with love as Esther Leigh to consent to a speedy marriage with the man of her choice, and after the usual coyness common to bashful maidens when asked to name the wedding-day, she agreed to wed at his wish and will.

"Why wait at all?" he urged.

So, upon the morrow it was arranged to go to the altar.

The Frenchwoman, who had good reasons for disliking the whole affair, although she dared not openly oppose it, suggested that there was hardly time for Miss Leigh to get ready for

such an important ceremony; but the gentleman laughed at the idea.

"Nonsense!" he exclaimed; "give me plenty of money, and I will undertake to fit out a dozen brides in four and twenty hours in a city like New York. Jackson, who is an invaluable man about matters of this sort, will attend to everything. I will have him set about the matter at once, and within an hour I will guarantee that he will be back here with half a dozen female tailors at his back."

And events proved that the master had not mistaken his man.

Before twelve that night all the orders had been given, and the busy seamstresses were at work upon the garments of the bride.

Her head fairly dizzy with happiness, the poor working girl retired to rest. Here was a wonderful change indeed for a few hours to make; it seemed more like a dream than reality. Forgotten now was all the disagreeable experience of the bindery, the persecution of old Walaker, and the silent attention of the manly young foreman. A few hours more and she would be the bride of the owner of this lordly mansion! Not that she thought of his wealth or social position; all she cared to consider was that she loved him with a love that she fondly imagined a girl could feel but once in a lifetime.

Light were her slumbers that night and pleasant her dreams.

By noon next day the ordered articles commenced to arrive, and the bride-expectant was in the "seventh heaven of delight."

Dudley went in person to choose the jewelry, and never was a promised bride more pleased, for the gentleman's taste was really superb.

Jackson, too, had carried out his part to perfection. The wedding was to take place that evening in one of the most fashionable churches in the city.

Dudley was going to act honestly with the girl, for he had a motive in binding himself to her, and he intended the ceremony to be one at which not even the sharpest lawyer could cavil.

It was to be strictly private—only the necessary witnesses to be present, although Jackson had arranged for the church to be lighted and decorated and all the assistants present, including the organist—all with as much ceremony as though the whole world was invited to witness the wedding of a king and queen.

At eight that evening the little bridal party entered the edifice, and, to the glorious harmony of the Wedding March, advanced to the altar.

The minister was an aged man, one of the oldest and most celebrated in the city, who had married hundreds of lovely girls, yet as Esther Leigh stood before him he thought he had never looked upon a more beautiful woman.

The service began; but when the minister came to that part of the marriage rite where he called upon all who knew aught why the ceremony should not be performed "to speak, or forever after hold their peace," there was a sudden disturbance at the main entrance of the church.

A portly man, followed by a policeman, came rushing in, and in a loud voice cried:

"Hold, I forbid the bans!"

CHAPTER X.

THE ACCUSATION.

THE sensation occasioned in the quiet church by the appearance of the stout gentleman and the blue-coated policeman can better be imagined than described.

The reverend gentleman, who for nearly forty years had been in the habit, weekly, almost daily, of calling upon somebody to come forward and say why the ceremony should not proceed, without ever being gratified in this respect, was now so much astonished that he could only stare at the intruders.

Upon the face of the girl a look of wonder appeared, but no trace of fear. Why should she tremble? She certainly was innocent of all wrong doing. She guessed, of course, when she saw her late employer bustle into the church—his face harsh with anger, and a burly policeman at his heels—that he did not come to honor her nuptials or to wish her joy; but, that his malice could do aught to injure her, she did not conceive possible.

Dudley's face for a moment was a study. He recognized the book binder the moment he entered the building, and from his words easily conjectured that Walaker had come with the intention of wresting his prize from him. Rage, blended with a slight tinge of personal apprehension, was plainly visible upon his features.

Jackson evidently shared his master's feelings.

"What is the matter, captain? What's broke? Is the jig up?" he whispered, rapidly, in Dudley's ear.

"It is possible, but keep a stiff upper lip and die game anyway," the master replied, in the same cautious way.

By this time old Walaker and his follower had come close to the altar.

"I am very sorry, doctor, to be obliged to interfere in this matter," the book-binder re-

marked, nodding familiarly to the minister with whom he was personally acquainted; "I have not the pleasure of this gentleman's acquaintance or I should also beg his pardon," he continued, looking at Dudley in an insolent sort of way; "but when I explain matters I have no doubt he will feel very much obliged to me, since I have come for the purpose of preventing him from making a fool of himself."

"Do you know that you are an insolent old rascal?" Dudley inquired, in cool contempt.

"What, you scoundrel!" cried the old man, becoming purple in the face with rage.

"Gentlemen, gentlemen, remember where you are!" exclaimed the minister, shocked by these unseemly proceedings.

"Yes, gentlemen, there ain't the least use for you two to check each other; there's no call for it," interposed the policeman.

"I really beg your pardon, doctor," Walaker remarked, with a great effort controlling the rage which threatened to throw him into a fit of apoplexy; "I am aware that I forgot myself, and can only plead in extenuation that I am not used to tamely submitting to insults; I ought to have remembered, though, that a man of this fellow's kind is not worth notice."

"Harkye, sir!" retorted Dudley, shaking his finger in menace, "your age and the difference in our social positions, as well as the sacred character of the building in which we stand, prevents me from bestowing upon you the chastisement which otherwise I should most surely inflict. This intrusion is a gross outrage, and if you have any claim at all to be considered a gentleman, you will instantly retire."

"Not until I have accomplished the business upon which I come," Walaker replied, a malignant smile upon his features. "I am sorry of course to interrupt this little ceremony, but these unpleasant things will happen, and the only thing we can do is to grin and bear it. Officer, do your duty!"

The policeman produced a folded paper, a legal-looking document, and advanced toward the girl.

"I've got an unpleasant duty to perform, miss," he said, respectfully, evidently impressed by the remarkable beauty of the almost bride, "but duty is duty, you know, miss, and has got to be done, no matter how unpleasant. Is your name Esther Leigh?"

"So I am called," she answered, gazing at him with great, staring eyes.

"I have a warrant here for your arrest."

"Arrest? Impossible!" cried Dudley.

"Arrest me?" stammered the girl, dazed at the sudden shock.

"Great heavens! what does this mean?" demanded the divine.

"This is some mistake!" Madelaine hastened to declare, by far the coolest of them all, but there was a malicious twinkle in her dusk eyes that belie her words.

"No, miss; no mistake at all," replied the officer, unfolding his warrant. "If this is Miss Esther Leigh she is my prisoner."

"Ridiculous!" Dudley cried. "The idea is perfectly absurd! What is the charge?"

"Check-raising!" answered old Walaker.

"Oh! and you are doubtless the aggrieved party?" Dudley added, contemptuously.

"Yes, sir, I am," and the old man glared at the young one as much as to say, "what are you going to do about it?"

"This accusation is monstrous, and it is evident malice is at the back of it; but I warn you, sir, I shall personally hold you responsible for this gross outrage."

"Bah, bah!" retorted the book-binder, snapping his fingers, "you cannot scare me. This girl has committed a crime and it is my duty as a man of business to see that she is punished; and I can tell you, sir, that John Jefferson Walaker is not a man to be turned one single iota from his course by all the young bloods in New York."

The clergyman, who had now in a measure recovered from his amazement, thought it expedient to speak.

"Gentlemen, gentlemen, remember where you are!" he protested. "Respect the sacred character of this building; altercation is unseemly, and I must request you to refrain."

"I am very sorry, indeed, doctor, but this is one of the cases that will not admit of delay. Then, too, I thought I was doing this young man a service, or otherwise I would have waited until the ceremony was ended and had the arrest made outside of the church," Walaker explained.

"That is an infamous falsehood, and you know it, sir!" Dudley asserted, in heat. "Doctor, in such a matter as this plain words are best. This accusation and arrest are all parts of a cunningly-contrived plan to prevent me from wedding this lady. This man has his own reasons for not wishing the ceremony to take place, but I can tell you, sir, I shall hold you to a bitter account for your share in this night's work," and the speaker shook his clinched fist fiercely at the old master of a hundred girls.

"Your threats I laugh at!" Walaker replied; "and very few words will disprove that charge of malice. Doctor, you shall be the judge and

if you do not decide that I have good cause for my procedure I will retire and abandon the matter immediately. You know me; my name is J. J. Walaker, and I am the proprietor of one of the largest book-binding establishments in this country. This person—this girl—has been in my employ, not one of my regular hands but an extra put on for a brief period. Her term of service expired a day or two ago; she was paid off and left the establishment; the wages coming to her for the week's work amounted to exactly six dollars. In accordance with my custom when an employee leaves my establishment for good, the money was paid in the form of a check. The check was given by this girl to her boarding-house mistress just before she left her dwelling in settlement of a bill amounting to four dollars, with the request to get it cashed and keep the change for her. The boarding-house lady is a shrewd and careful woman, who, by long experience, has learned to be distrustful. The check and the amount for which it was drawn excited her suspicions, and before attempting to cash it she came directly to me for the purpose of ascertaining if everything was correct. You will not wonder, doctor, at the course pursued by this experienced woman of the world when you examine the check; oblige me by looking at it," and Walaker drew the check from his pocket-book and handed it to the minister.

With trembling hands the minister examined it.

"Why, it is for sixty dollars!" he exclaimed.

"Exactly; six has been changed into sixty, and the operation has been performed so neatly, too, that if this check had been presented to me, and the circumstances of the case had faded from my mind, I have not the least doubt I should have said it was all right."

"My dear young lady, what have you to say to this?" the old divine asked, in a trembling voice.

To all outward seeming, Esther was now the least affected if any one present, being perfectly calm and self-possessed, her face a trifle paler perhaps than usual, but that was all.

"I cannot explain it," she answered. "The check was given to me inclosed in an envelope, and I never even looked at it until after I reached my boarding-house. Then, in the presence of the boarding-house keeper, I opened the envelope, took out the check and gave it to her, telling her to save the change for me. I supposed, of course, it was for six dollars, but I never noticed that it was or was not. She told me I must write my name on the back, and I did so, and that is all I know about the matter."

The minister groaned audibly; circumstances were strongly against the girl. It seemed incredible that she could have acted so carelessly.

"Well, doctor, am I justified in my proceedings?" Walaker asked.

"Sir, I cannot blame you," the clergyman replied, sadly.

"Your duty then, officer?" the old man ordered.

"Stop a moment, officer, if you please!" cried Dudley, before the policeman could move.

"I denounce this whole proceeding as a foul outrage—a conspiracy planned with fiendish cunning to entrap this young lady. It is not the first time that such a thing has been done; and when this matter comes to be examined, I think, sir, you will find that you have got yourself into an ugly scrape."

"In that case, then, the quicker we can get an examination the better," observed Walaker, with a sardonic smile. "So suppose we go ahead as quickly as possible! Of course your rubbish about a conspiracy I treat with the contempt it deserves."

"I think, gents—if you will allow me to put my oar in—that the quicker we get into a court-room the better it will be for all parties," the policeman now suggested. "In course, if there has been any mistake there is the place to find it out."

"What I started to say, doctor, was that this absurd accusation need make no difference in the performance of the marriage ceremony. I laugh at the ridiculous charge, and am quite ready to fulfill my plighted troth with this lady despite the accusation which has been so brutally brought against her. So, officer, if you will have the kindness to grant us five minutes, we will finish the ceremony."

"No! No such thing can be thought of for a moment!" Walaker hastened to aver. He had timed the arrest so as to wholly prevent the wedding. "Officer, do your duty and remove the prisoner at once. As the complainant in this case I demand that the law take its course without delay!"

Now the officer, though a coarse-grained man, with a great idea of his own importance, yet was not wholly unimpressed with the beauty of the distressed girl, so he turned upon the book-binder quite sharply:

"I reckon I know my business, sir," he announced; "I don't see any objection to this hyer thing at all. This lady is my prisoner, and I am responsible for her, and if I don't deliver her at the police-station, you kin go for me, and

that is all there is to it. I ain't got the least objection, miss; if you want this hyer thing to go ahead, sail in! you kin have an hour if you like!" and the officer threw a glance of defiance at the old prosecutor, who was fairly boiling with rage.

But the young lady put a stop to the dispute.

"Officer, I thank you for your kindness, but I will not avail myself of the offer," she said, in a voice singularly firm and resolute under the circumstances. "I have too much self-respect to take any man's name while there is a stain upon my own. Until this accusation is disproved, Esther Leigh will remain Esther Leigh."

"The young lady is perfectly correct in this decision," the minister remarked. "A wedding under such circumstances would not be a seemly proceeding, and I confess I should not be willing to perform it."

Dudley was desperate, for a sudden apprehension had seized upon him that the prize which he had toiled so hard to win was about to escape him. The cup, right at his lips, was to be dashed down by an untoward hand, never again, perhaps, to be raised.

"Esther, you have given me your word, and I claim the fulfillment of your promise!" he cried.

"I will keep my word, though all the world should come between us, if you claim it, but not while my good name is tarnished," she replied, firmly.

Dudley saw that she was immovable, and so, though mad with rage, he desisted.

Straight to the nearest police-station they all went.

CHAPTER XI.

THE STORY OF JANET O'DARE.

IN ONE of the small upper rooms of the Astor House—one of the cheapest apartments which that famous hostelry afforded—sat an elderly man, who, from his outward seeming, was a countryman. He was tall and "slab-sided," thin in feature, with a sort of greedy, hungry expression. Even his hands were thin and claw-like, strongly putting one in mind of a bird's talons—hands formed for clutching and for retaining whatever they seized.

This was Abraham Daily, ex-school-teacher, and now a farmer in a small way in the northern part of the State of New York, near the town of Plattsburg, by Champlain's charming waters.

It was night; the gas was lit, and by its light the old man had half a dozen times nervously examined his watch, evidently expecting some one.

Just as the city clocks marked the hour of nine, the person for whom he waited made his appearance.

In everything but years, the new-comer was the exact counterpart of the elder man—a veritable "chip of the old block," for the young man was the son of the old one—his name being John Henry Daily.

"Well, well, you are not very prompt," growled the old gentleman, as the young man made his appearance.

"I came as soon as I got your message; I didn't expect you in town so soon, and was not on the look-out."

"Yes, yes, you have always plenty of excuses; but take a chair and tell me what progress you have made."

The young man helped himself to a chair, stretched out his long legs in an indolent way, then shook his head.

"What, what?" exclaimed the father, "do you mean to say that you haven't been able to accomplish anything?"

"Not a thing, dad."

"You got my telegram, of course, telling you to put the detectives on the track?"

"And to spare no expense," continued the other. "But, respected sire, that is rather a loose way of putting it. I hadn't any idea of how much you was willing to stand. You told me to draw on you for funds, and when I did draw, to the tune of five hundred dollars, you refused to honor the draft, but sent me a paltry fifty dollars instead."

"I thought you were crazy! What possible use could you make of five hundred dollars?"

"Do you suppose you can get detectives for nothing?"

"But it is the business of the authorities to look into all such cases of mysterious disappearances."

"Is it? Well, you go to head-quarters and ventilate that idea as I did and you will get laughed at as a fool for your pains. I told my story—how the girl, your ward, the heiress of a large fortune—I didn't give the exact figures, for, dad, to tell the truth, I thought your story of a million was extremely fishy—had disappeared; that you supposed she had come to the city and wanted her found; and that money was no object. The superintendent asked if there were any suspicions of foul play in the case; I answered that there wasn't, as far as I knew; then he said the affair was rather out of his line, and I had better employ some private parties to look into the matter. I got on a high horse, immediately, and told him that I thought

it was his duty to attend to it, and that the least he could do would be to send out a general alarm, warning all the officers on post to look out for the fugitive. "Oh, nonsense, young man," he replied; "we should have our hands full if we attempted to look up every young woman who takes it into her head to see a little of the world. The police of a great city have got other fish to fry." Then I tried the private parties—the fellows who advertise to look i to all such things, but I found not one of them willing to take hold until some cash was paid down; and I tell you what it is, governor, it's going to spoil the looks of a five-hundred-dollar bill if you mean business."

The old man groaned.

"It is a terrible lot of money to risk on an uncertainty, but I must go ahead," he declared. "You do not know the story of Janet O'Dare, of course."

"I know that she is the daughter of Thomas O'Dare, who died about fifteen years ago, and whose confidential man of business you used to be; and that, when he died, by the terms of his will, you became the guardian of the girl. I supposed, too, that there was some little property left to her, and that was the reason why you were so anxious to cook up a match between her and myself; but when you telegraphed me about her being the heiress of a million you fairly took my breath away."

"It is true—all true, every word of it, and the worst is, I fear she suspects the truth, and that is why she has fled. Her story is soon told: I, myself, although I attended to nearly all of Thomas O'Dare's business, had no idea of his wealth until after his death, but when I came to settle up the affairs of the estate I found that, altogether, he had left about half a million of dollars. All the money was judiciously invested, and during these fifteen years it has more than doubled. O'Dare was a strange, odd man. He had two daughters, the eldest named Clara, and the other, twelve years younger, was Janet. Clara eloped from her father's roof and married a worthless vagabond, one of those human sharks who prey upon society. The fellow married the girl thinking that, in time, the father would forgive the imprudent act, and so give him access to the family money-bags, but the father was a tough bit of humanity and he not only did not forgive the daughter but, with all he possessed, fled like a thief in the night, taking his baby girl with him, so that neither his daughter nor her husband was ever able to trace him. He told me this story just before he died, for the events had taken place before I became acquainted with him. Soured by the disobedience of his eldest daughter, and believing that she would never have been persuaded to the act had not the villain who won her affections felt sure the father would give her a handsome portion, he determined that neither his remaining daughter nor the world at large should know that he was a wealthy man; so before he died he so arranged that Janet should never suspect she was the heiress of a colossal fortune until she came of age, and even then it was tied up so that she can only enjoy the interest until a certain time. This was to save her from being the prey of any fortune-hunter. But for the last month or two I have had a suspicion that the girl, in some mysterious manner, got an inkling that she was something more than the penniless orphan, dependent upon my bounty, as for the past fifteen years, in obedience to her father's wishes, I have led her to believe. Of course, as you know, for the last five or six years I have tried my best to make a match between you and her; I wished to secure the fortune for you, my boy, although not even to you did I ever hint that she was worth anything like the money that is coming to her."

"And in regard to that little matter she has been as obstinate as a mule," remarked the son. "To use the vernacular of the period—she couldn't cotton to your humble servant for a cent."

"I fear I was too hasty—too imperious about the affair," the old man admitted, with a sigh. "I thought the girl would yield when it came to the point, if I was only firm with her, and so I tried to bulldoze her. I told her decidedly that, as her guardian, I had the right to dispose of her hand, and declared to her that she must make up her mind to marry you whether the match was agreeable to her or not."

"And then, when you put on the gad in that unceremonious way, like a spiteful filly she took the bit between her teeth and bolted."

"Yes, yes, but she must be found, never mind what it costs! Only think, John, a girl worth a million!"

"Running around loose, eh?"

"I'll try persuasion; 'sugar catches more flies than vinegar,' says the old adage. I was an ass to attempt to force the girl into compliance."

"Yes; but I say, father, what ever became of this elder sister of whom you spoke?"

"All I know of her was what O'Dare told me; dead, probably, or at least he always spoke as if she was. But never mind her; it is Janet we want. She must be found even if it takes a mint of money!"

"Come along with me and I will take you to the detectives; they're open at all hours. A few hundred dollars will do the trick, sure!"

Five minutes later they were on the way.

CHAPTER XII.

A CUNNING MOVE.

It was a brave quest that the telegraph girl had taken upon herself when she had resolved to act the spy upon the Wall-street blood, but in a game of this kind Almon Dudley was not the man to play dummy, as the telegraph girl well knew, so she was on her guard.

Assisted by that irrepressible specimen of Young America, Willy Woolley, the messenger-boy, Tick Tick kept so close a watch upon Dudley as to be able to track him to the church, and there, while discreetly remaining unobserved, witnessed the strange scene which had occurred.

The face of the beautiful girl whose nuptials were so oddly interrupted perplexed our heroine not a little.

"Where have I seen that girl before?" she murmured, as from her nook she watched the party file out of the church. "Her face is very familiar and yet for the life of me I cannot remember when or where I have seen it. It is more like a dream than reality, and yet I know it is no dream, but a remembrance that comes perhaps from my childhood's days, it is so dim and uncertain. Why does her face so strangely impress me?"

It was a question she could not answer, although it came to her again and again, as she followed the party to the police court and watched the examination that took place there.

And after it was over, and the telegraph girl wended her way to her solitary habitation, the face of the beautiful girl still haunted her.

"I must frame some excuse to have speech with her," she decided, "and see if I cannot discover why it is that her face affects me strangely. Poor girl! She is in terrible peril, yet if she only knew this smiling, smooth-tongued villain, whom she would have wedded, as well as I do, gladly would she greet the bitterest punishment which the law could inflict, rather than be his bride. The interruption was a godsend to her, although now—so blind are we poor worms—no doubt she looks upon it in the light of a terrible calamity."

And while Tick Tick was brooding over the misfortune which had come to poor Esther Leigh, she had little idea that before four-and-twenty hours a great and grievous peril would also encompass herself!

The next day the girl telegraph operator attended to her duties as usual, closed up the office at the appointed hour, and, attended by Willy Woolley, took her way up the street.

It was quite dark, the stores being nearly all closed, and the two, busy in conversation, never noticed that they were dogged from the ferry-house by a well-dressed, medium-sized, and rather slouchy-looking man, who had evidently been on the lookout for them.

When the two got half-way up the street the man crossed over and intercepted them.

"Let me see," he said, advancing toward them, taking the center of the sidewalk so as to block the way, "I think you are the young lady I want to see."

Thus brought to a halt, the telegraph girl looked at the man in astonishment, for he was a perfect stranger; she had a good memory for faces, and after the first glance at the fellow she was sure she had never seen him before.

"Haven't you made a mistake, sir?" she asked, while the boy, after his impulsive fashion, glared defiance at the stranger.

"Oh, no; I'm not the kind of a man who makes mistakes. Your name is Frances Carden, isn't it?"

"It is."

"And you are a telegraph girl in the employ of the Western Union Company?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then you are the heifer I want," asserted the other in an insolent manner. "I will have to trouble you to come along with me, and without being ugly about it, either, for you are my prisoner!" And, as he spoke, he drew a folded paper from his breast-pocket and laid his heavy hand upon her shoulder.

The girl drew her slight form up, quivering with indignation, while the boy at once threw himself into a pugilistic position and cried:

"Jest you say the word, Frankie, and I'll pitch into him."

"Oh, you will, will you, young hop-o'-my-thumb?" exclaimed the stranger, with a coarse laugh. "Well, now, if you will take a friend's advice, you won't crow so loud, or else you may get into trouble. I don't suppose you know who I am, either of you two?"

"No, sir; I do not, for one."

"And I don't want to know for another!" squealed Willy, indignantly.

"Well, my name is Tim Smith, and I am one of the private detectives of the Western Union Company; and I have got a warrant for your arrest, so you had better come along quietly, and avoid trouble."

"A warrant for my arrest!" exclaimed the

girl, hardly able to believe that she had heard correctly. "Oh, there must be some mistake!"

"Nary time!"

"Mebbe you can't read straight!" suggested the messenger-boy, still on hostile thoughts intent.

"You had better keep a civil tongue in your head or I'll rap you over the noddle with this hyer club until you see more stars than you ever dreamed of!" warned the man, drawing a short club from his pocket and shaking it defiantly at the boy.

"Let me see the warrant. Of what am I accused?" cried the girl.

"Embezzlement. Here it is, all set down as straight as a string!"

He opened the paper so that the girl could read it, and surely enough, it was a warrant in due form for her arrest, the complainant being the president of the telegraph company.

"Oh, this is monstrous!" she cried, utterly unable to understand how it was that such an accusation could be leveled against her. "I have never wronged the telegraph company out of a single cent; no fault has ever been found with my accounts."

"Well, now, miss, to tell you the truth, we don't think you are so much to blame as some others that we haven't been able to lay our hooks on as yet, and that is the reason why my orders are to take you to the president of the company instead of carrying you right before a police court. The governor has an idea that mebbe, when you find yourself in a hole, you will be able and willing to give away some points so that we can get hold of the others."

"But it is all a mistake, I assure you. I know absolutely nothing of any wrong-doing."

"An' don't you go with him, Frankie!" cried the boy. "He's a bait! I kin see it with half an eye!"

CHAPTER XIII.

"ANOTHER MORE POTENT THAN THE FIRST."

"DON'T you dare to attempt to resist or I'll make it hot for you!" cried the detective, working himself into a passion and swinging the club threateningly.

"You jest come here and knock a chip off'en my shoulder!" howled the boy, dancing up and down and flourishing his arms around like a windmill, yet taking care at the same time to keep out of the detective's reach.

"Hallo, hallo, what's this row?" exclaimed a short, thick-set man in a plain dark suit, appearing suddenly upon the scene.

"What is that to you?" demanded the man with the club, turning upon him fiercely.

"Don't you talk that way to me! I'll have you to know that I have got a perfect right to interfere."

"The blazes you have! Who are you, anyway?"

"I am Detective Irving, of the Central Office!" replied the other in a tone of authority, throwing open the lapel of his coat as he spoke and displaying his badge.

This sight had due effect upon the Western Union man, for he immediately became civil.

"Oh, I beg your pardon! Of course I didn't know who you were, for I never had the pleasure of meeting you before, although you are well known to me by reputation."

"Well, what is the trouble here, and who are you?" asked the Central Office detective, in his brisk, business-like way.

"My name is Smith—Tim Smith; perhaps you have heard of me? I am a detective in the employ of the Western Union Telegraph Company."

"Never had that pleasure; but what is the trouble between you and these parties?"

"This girl is one of our operators, and we have discovered something crooked in her accounts. We have an idea, too, that there is quite a lot of our clerks mixed up in the matter; so the old man swore out a warrant for the arrest of this girl, and my instructions are to carry her to his house, as he thought that when she found she was in a hole she might be willing to make a clean breast and give the gang away."

"Instead of taking her before a court?"

"Exactly; and if she squeals on the rest, why, we will let her off and use her as a witness."

"But this accusation is infamous!" exclaimed Tick Tick, who could not keep quiet any longer.

"I am as innocent as a child of any wrong-doing!"

"Well, my girl, you've got a good face and you don't look as if you could be 'fly' to any division business," the detective observed, quite kindly. "But you must remember that if you were guilty it would be your game to cry out that you were innocent as long as you could, so of course, in all such cases, words don't go for anything. Is it a warrant?" he asked, turning abruptly to the man.

"All right and reg'lar," the other replied, handing it over for the detective's inspection.

"It is perfectly correct, miss," after a careful examination, "and you will have to go with

this party, but I tell you what it is, I will go along, too, and see that everything is all right, although I have not the least doubt that it is; but, as I said before, you have got a good face, and I reckon there must be some mistake—so I will go along, and see you through if I can."

"All right; I am satisfied!" the representative of the telegraph company assented. "You will find that everything is straight, and although I think we have a pretty clear case against this young woman, yet she may be able to explain matters so as to make everything straight. Of course I hope she can, for it ain't a pleasant job for any man to get a pretty girl like this miss here into trouble. I've got a hack around the corner, so we can go right up."

"Say, boss, kin I go, too?" piped Willy, who did not relish the idea of being left behind.

"Well, no, my little man; I guess we will have to bar you out. You haven't got anything against this youngster?" the detective said to the telegraph man.

"No! I wish I had," he replied, savagely. "It would do me good to put that young imp behind the bars."

"You'll never do it, lanky!" cried the boy, in derision; "but I'll come and see you hung one of these days, see if I don't!"

"I'll lay for you!"

"Mebbe you will, an' mebbe you won't! I ain't skeered!"

The two men accompanied the girl around the corner to where the hack stood, Willy following at a safe distance in the rear.

The detectives assisted Tick Tick to enter; then got in themselves, and away the coach went.

The boy had made up his mind to accompany the party, even though he had been refused a ride. So, when the coach started, he galloped after it, intending to perch up on the rear, but the coach afforded no chance for a "cut behind," and Willy soon saw that if he wanted to go he must trust to Shank's mare.

The boy was determined to make one of the party, even if he had to run every step of the way; so dropped behind for a "hold on." But the driver of the hack, a low-browed, brutal-looking fellow, had been on the lookout, and being provided with a stout, long-lashed whip, he brought it around with a will and gave the telegraph boy an awful cut on his fat legs.

This was entirely unexpected, and the pain drew forth a yell from Willy, who immediately let go of the coach and fell to rubbing his legs.

The driver chuckled and whipped up his horses until the animals trotted their best.

The boy was smart enough to perceive the game: it was not intended that he should follow the coach.

"But I will follow it, though, if I die for it!" he cried, amid his sobs of mingled rage and pain; "and as for that beastly driver, if I don't whack a stone at him that will make his head swim before I get through, I wish I may die!" and when his mind was once made up he was just the boy to stick to a job through thick and thin.

"They don't want me to foller that hearse, and if they think I'm arter it, they will do their level best to head me off," he muttered, as he took to the sidewalk and ran on at a brisk gait. "So my leetle game is to keep shady and not let 'em know that I am arter them."

This was not an impossible thing to do, for the boy was a good runner and the driver soon slackened his speed, for a coach traveling at break-neck speed through the streets of New York after dark would be certain to provoke an investigation by the police.

Keeping well in the rear, Willy followed like a sleuth-hound on the track.

Up the side street into Broadway went the hack, from Broadway into Park Row, then through Printing House Square to Chatham street.

"It will be a mighty long run," the boy murmured, as he passed under the elevated railroad station and followed the coach down the Chatham street hill. "I reckon the boss lives clear up in Fifth avenue, somewheres, mebbe as far as Central Park, and, Lordy! I don't believe I kin ever stand it to run that distance, if they keep the hosses trotting along like this."

But at the foot of the hill the coach made an abrupt turn to the right and disappeared from the boy's sight down a narrow street.

"Well, if that ain't a rum go!" Willy muttered, amazed. "They have gone down Roosevelt street! What are they up to, anyway?"

And when the boy reached the corner the sound of wheels had ceased!

"Blamed if they ain't stopped!" he exclaimed, halting in the shadows of the corner house and peering cautiously down the street.

Roosevelt street is hardly more than a lane—narrow, dark and full of vile smells, about as ugly an avenue as the city can show.

The lad had hardly time to peer around the corner when again the sound of the carriage wheels fell upon his ears.

He was about to advance and again take up the chase when he made a discovery which caused him to rapidly retrace his steps, skulk

around the corner and find concealment in a convenient doorway.

The carriage was returning!

On it came, turned the corner, and headed toward Broadway, going back to exactly where it had come from!

The driver, intent upon his own thoughts, looked neither to the right nor left, and therefore took no heed of the boy hiding in the doorway.

And Willy, peeping forth, made a discovery that filled him with astonishment—a discovery which threatened to set at naught all the pains which he had taken to pursue the hack, and great was the rage and mortification which swelled within his breast.

The coach was empty!

CHAPTER XIV.

THE EXAMINATION.

To the nearest police court the wedding-party and the uninvited guests, who had managed to interfere so materially with the ceremony, proceeded.

It had been Dudley's idea that the judge could be summoned, an immediate examination granted, and then Esther could be released on bail.

But, as it happened, it was not possible to carry out this plan. The judge could not be reached, and Dudley, to his intense disgust, found there was no way in which he could prevent the young woman from being locked up for the night.

But he put the best possible face on the matter, cheered his betrothed up all he could, and assured her that neither time nor money would be spared to prove her innocence.

Esther was pale and calm; she did not seem to be in the least alarmed at the prospect before her, and took leave of her lover in a manner that puzzled him.

"By Jove! she has a wonderful nerve," he said to his familiar, Jackson, when they had arrived at home.

As the reader will perceive, the man, Jackson, although apparently only a servant in the household, was in reality his master's confidential adviser.

"Yes, she is a plucky girl; ninety-nine out of a hundred would have broke down and whimpered under the circumstances."

"But there wasn't the sign of a tear about her; she was as calm as though being locked up in a prison cell with the prospect of a trip to the State Prison was a mere everyday affair."

"Well, what do you think of it? A plant, eh?" asked Jackson after a brief pause.

"Mos decidedly! The old scoundrel marked her for his prey; she told me of two or three little things that happened during the last week she was in his bindery which convinced me that the old scamp was after the girl, and that was one reason why I made up my mind to get her to consent to be married as soon as possible. I knew old Walaker had plenty of money, and was utterly unscrupulous—a bigger rascal than either you or I, Jackson, although, with circumstances favoring him, there is very little doubt that he will go down to his grave without the world finding it out; and I was afraid that he might be tempted to play the girl some ugly trick—"

"As he has."

"Exactly; it is quite plain that he has kept a watch on the girl ever since she left his place, and possibly before. This check business is a trap that he has arranged for the express purpose of catching the girl, and he so timed the arrest as to break off the marriage. If the ceremony had been performed, it would have upset his schemes."

"What is the programme, now?"

"To get the girl off, although I am afraid the scheme had been so carefully planned that if we cannot induce old Walaker to hold off his hands, he will be apt to railroad Esther into State Prison in spite of us."

"That will be ugly, won't it?"

"Yes, but I will have her out of that before she has been there a month. The prize is too rich a one, and I have schemed too deeply for it to have my booty wrested from my hands after I am fairly in possession of it."

Jackson seemed lost in thought; the other did not interrupt his reverie, for he understood that something would come of it.

"Captain," he said, abruptly, "I am afraid we are running on a wrong trail here. Do you know, I don't like this woman business, and we ain't exactly the sort of chaps to hunger after a chance to get into courts. Our characters won't bear investigation, and if we get this old Walaker after us, who knows what he may be able to smell out!"

"Jackson, you have only one fault, and that is you are inclined to be overcautious," Dudley replied, instantly. "You forget how great the stake is for which I play, and how easy it will be to secure it. The game was fairly in my hands, and but for this inopportune arrest, would now be securely mine beyond the shadow of a doubt. Now then, is it wise to turn back, after all my trouble, and give up my purpose merely because for a time the clouds lower?"

"If it was anything but a woman affair," Jackson persisted.

"Bah! I am no believer in that superstition; and as to being hunted down by this old scoundrel, let him look to himself, or I will pay him a midnight visit one of these days that will give him food for thought for some time! As regards the court business, we are not obliged to appear prominently at all. I will secure an able criminal lawyer to defend the girl, some well-known man who has never been mixed up with us at all."

Jackson shook his head.

"I am afraid, captain, it won't be of any use."

"You are in the dumps, old man; but let me alone to pull through. 'From out of this nettle, danger, we will pluck the flower, safety.'"

Perceiving that it was quite useless to attempt to reason his master out of the course which he had resolved to adopt, Jackson discreetly gave up the effort, and the two fell to discussing the best mode of action.

What was finally resolved upon the reader will see anon.

On the following morning the judge who presided over the court before which the case of Esther Leigh had been brought, took his seat upon the bench promptly at nine, and hers was the third case called.

The judge happened to be a personal friend of the book-binder's, and he nodded to him in the most familiar manner when the case came up.

The charge was made; the prisoner, when questioned, quietly replied that she was "not guilty," and the judge, who prided himself upon his judicial shrewdness, immediately mistook her calm innocence for the hardened effrontery of an old offender, and instantly concluded that the quicker she was "sent up the river" the better it would be for the community at large.

Walaker gave his evidence; then the treasurer of the bindery, whose duty it was to draw the checks, testified distinctly that he had filled out the check payable to the order of Esther Leigh for the sum of six dollars, had taken that check, with a number of others, to Mr. Walaker for his signature, and then, after it had been signed, he had placed it in an envelope upon which he had inscribed the girl's name, securely sealed it and placed it with the rest of the envelopes, wherein the wages of the employees were inclosed.

The testimony of this gentleman was plain and straightforward, and all within the courtroom were impressed with the idea that he had sworn to nothing but the truth.

Over the faces of the eminent criminal lawyers who had been employed to defend the girl came a grave look as they listened to this testimony, and, shrewd and able as they were, they didn't for the life of them see how they were going to upset or weaken the statement.

Then the prosecuting lawyer had a conference with his associate counsel and Mr. Walaker. When this was finished he addressed the judge and asked for a postponement, as some important witness, whose evidence was most material to the case, had not arrived.

The counsel for the defense were quite willing to agree to this; for the present they were utterly in a fog; the evidence seemed so strong and complete against their client that they could not see their way to a defense.

In obedience to a whispered suggestion from Dudley, who sat near at hand, one of the lawyers asked that their client be admitted to bail, but to this the opposite side immediately objected—they had been warned by the old book-binder in regard to this—unless indeed the bail was fixed at such a sum as would be certain to secure the presence of the prisoner for trial, as the lawyer stated it was the belief of the prosecution that the prisoner at the bar was but the tool of more experienced hands, and if a light bail was fixed, she would never appear, being only too glad to forfeit the recognizance, and so escape conviction.

At this declaration the eyes of Dudley and his man, Jackson, met, and each one mentally put the same question:

"Was this done for effect, or had the lawyers really got hold of the tail of a rat?"

"I do not wish to be bailed," the girl said to her lawyers in a low, but resolute voice.

"But, my dear, consider!" exclaimed both of the legal lights in a breath, amazed at the announcement.

"I have considered everything; there is a stain upon my name, and until it is wiped away I am not fit to go at large among honest people. A jail is the proper place for a girl accused of such a crime as I am, until her innocence is made manifest to all the world!"

The lawyers shrugged their shoulders; here was an oddity with a vengeance, but when the judge announced that he should require at the least five thousand dollars bail, they thought it was as well the girl was content to remain in durance.

The case was set for that day two weeks. Esther shook hands with her friends and departed for the prison with a mien as calm and dignified as a queen proceeding to her throne.

CHAPTER XV.

A PECULIAR OFFER.

EVEN the prison officials, with all their experience, were puzzled by the behavior of the young woman, and knew not what to make of it.

She was calm, and seemed to take everything as a matter of course, never making the least complaint, and it only took a short time to impress the keepers with the conviction that she was an altogether different being from the mortals who usually came under their care; at the same time they were all prone to believe, with the prosecuting lawyer, that if she was not an old hand at the check-raising business, she was the tool of those who were, and that her calm unconcern arose from the belief that, no matter how great the peril threatening her, the parties whom she served had influence and money enough to secure an acquittal.

"She's a lady, anyhow! you can bet your boots on that, no matter whether she did the trick or not," the head keeper observed, confidentially, to one of his intimates after the accused had been in his care for a few days.

After a little while one of the lawyers who had undertaken the defense called upon her, with the idea of picking up a few points. Dudley had declared to him his belief that the whole thing was a cunningly contrived plan on the part of old Walaker to get the girl into his power; but in this idea the lawyer did not take much stock, for it seemed wildly improbable to him that a man like the old book-binder should be fool enough to commit a crime just because he had become infatuated by the pretty face of a friendless work-girl.

And one of the chief reasons why the lawyer called upon the maiden was to ascertain what she thought about the matter.

This man of the law was an old practitioner not to be easily deceived. He distrusted Dudley from the beginning, although he knew nothing about him; he felt that Dudley was keeping something back, and suspected that despite the apparent respectability of that gentleman, he was the party in the background who had put the young woman up to altering the check.

"I can't get a client off as a general rule without knowing exactly how he stands," he assured her keepers. "If I don't know the particulars of the case, I am liable to have a trap sprung upon me by the prosecuting attorney at any time." So the counsel, who was a portly, well-preserved man of fifty, with a dignified aspect and a fatherly way, was admitted to the cell occupied by Esther.

It was a small apartment, about eight by ten, containing only an iron bedstead and a single stool.

A small window, high up in the wall at the end of the apartment, securely protected by stout iron bars, admitted light, and in the iron door was a smaller window, also guarded by a grating, which looked out upon the corridor.

"Counselor Hare to see you, Miss Leigh," announced the keeper, unlocking the door and admitting the lawyer.

Esther, who was reclining upon the edge of the little bed with her head resting upon her clasped hands, her eyes fixed upon the ceiling, apparently day-dreaming, rose to receive the lawyer and shook hands with him, as perfectly at her ease as though she was greeting him in the parlor of her own mansion.

"What is this?" the lawyer thought, as he accepted the stool which she brought him and sat down, "conscious innocence or unlimited impudence?"

"Rather close quarters here, Miss Leigh," the gentleman remarked after he was seated, with a glance at the narrow confines of the cell.

"Yes, sir, it is not a large apartment."

"But you seem comfortable and contented—that is, I judge such is the case, for you don't seem to fret much."

"What would be the use? Is it not better to be contented with our lot, no matter how hard or how humble it is, than to wear out our life by vain endeavors to escape, beating against the manacles of destiny like the poor imprisoned wild bird against the bars of his cage?"

"Why, you are quite a philosopher!"

"No, I am only patient," she replied, with a sigh.

"You have taken matters so coolly as to lead every one, who knows anything about your case, to believe that you do not think you are in any particular danger."

The girl looked surprised.

"Isn't that a correct idea?" he asked, noticing her amazement.

"Oh, no, sir; not at all! I fully realize the danger which threatens me, and understand that, unless something very like a miracle interposes in my behalf, I shall be convicted of this infamous crime which my very soul abhors and sent to prison. My calmness does not come, sir, because I think there is any chance of my escaping the impending doom, but because I utterly despair of fighting against the evil destiny which pursues me. I believe I must have been born under some unlucky star, for nothing

but misfortune seems to follow my footsteps wherever I go."

But this old man of the law, still suspicious, asked himself if this wasn't all put on to "pull the wool over his eyes."

"You have led a somewhat checkered life," he remarked.

The girl sighed and looked down at the floor, but made no other reply.

"Perhaps you will aid me in the task I have undertaken—your defense—if you will make a confidant of me and give me a sketch of your past life," vailing the artful suggestion under an appearance of great frankness.

Esther shook her head.

"You don't agree with me, eh?"

"No, sir; my past life has nothing at all to do with my present position; there isn't anything in it that would be of any service for you to know, and I have good and sufficient reasons for not wishing to speak of it."

"Of course I presume you know best in regard to that, but the better course in all matters of this sort, my dear young lady, is not to conceal anything from your legal adviser. Little things—trifles, apparently, to you—sometimes are so important that a life may depend upon them," remarked the old lawyer, earnestly.

"As I have told you, there is nothing in my life before I came to New York which has anything to do with my present peril, therefore you must pardon my silence; really, there is nothing to tell which would be of the least interest to you. My life has been a plain and uneventful one until this calamity befell me."

"Well, how about your life since you arrived in the city?" asked the counsel.

"There is very little to tell. I came to the city to earn my living, being obliged to rely upon my own resources. I saw in a newspaper that extra girls were wanted in Mr. Walaker's bindery. I applied and was given work."

"Anything in particular happen while you were working in the bindery? The reason I ask is that Mr. Dudley gave me to understand that something out of the common run did occur there."

A slight tinge of color crept into the girl's face.

"I presume I ought to speak freely," she remarked, slowly, evidently reluctant to speak.

"If you don't, my dear young lady, I might as well throw up the case," the lawyer assured his client, rather testily.

"When I was working in the bindery I was the subject of unpleasant remarks by the other girls on account of the attention and favors, so they claimed, of Mr. Walaker, and his nephew, the foreman of the bindery. I knew the old gentleman went out of his way to speak to me, but I was not conscious that the other did; only, on one occasion happening to overhear some bitter remarks he reproved the girl who made them. This was during my last day in the bindery; a short time after this occurred, as I was getting ready to go home, he told me that Mr. Walaker wished to see me in his private office, and then he added a mysterious warning to the effect that the woman who sold herself always regretted the sacrifice all the days of her life. I did not understand what he meant then nor why he should speak in such a way, but before I got through with my interview with Mr. Walaker I did understand. Mr. Walaker handed me the envelope, containing this fatal check which has ensnared me; then he told me he had a proposition to make. The bindery, he said, was no place for such a girl as I was, and he wished me to come and live at his house as a companion to his wife who, he stated, was an invalid whose death might be expected at any moment, and then, if I was a sensible girl and behaved myself, he might marry me."

"And you, I suppose, replied pretty sharply to this proposition?" the lawyer suggested, noting the color rising in the girl's cheeks and the fire gleaming in her eyes as she told the tale.

"I did, sharply and plainly."

"And he became angry, I presume, probably threatened you with the weight of his anger if you refused?"

"I think he did, but I was too excited at the time, too full of rage, mortification and shame to note exactly what he did say. I got away as soon as possible."

"Well, you have given me a point to work upon," the counselor remarked, rising and preparing to depart. "I don't know exactly what I can make of it, but, possibly I can do something with it. It shows that the old man may have a motive for wishing to do you an ill-turn. I'll set a little detective of my own at work among the people employed in the bindery, and perhaps he will be able to pick up a fact or two to corroborate your story. No witnesses to this interview of course?"

"None."

"He'll deny the whole thing, naturally, and in such a case as this his word would have more weight than yours, unless we can get hold of something to back up your statement. Well, good-by, miss; I'll call again in a day or two."

Again was Esther left to her reflections.

An hour perhaps passed, when the iron door again swung open and a visitor entered.

The girl rose with a face like a tragedy queen when she looked upon her visitor.

It was old Walaker.

"Well, well, this is a nice box for a girl like you!" he exclaimed with a sardonic grin.

CHAPTER XVI.

WALAKER DEFINES HIS POSITION.

THE expression of utter scorn and contempt which appeared upon Esther's face showed even the dull and arrogant old book-binder that he had made a mistake in addressing her so coarsely, and in a clumsy way he hastened to make amends.

"Don't be offended," he said, endeavoring to assume the most gracious manner; "I did not mean to wound you, but the remark rose involuntarily to my lips upon beholding such a queenly girl as you are in such a place as this."

"Why do you come here, sir?" demanded Esther, her voice really stern and her eyes flashing.

"To see you, of course!"

"To enjoy your triumph?"

"My dear young lady, you mustn't speak in any such fashion as this; there really isn't any occasion for it. You take a wrong idea of the matter," Walaker observed, endeavoring to assume as friendly a manner as possible. The book-binder had not expected to find the girl in any such mood as this.

In dealing with the girls in his bindery he had never had any difficulty in getting along with them. He looked upon them as being in a measure his slaves, and had been accustomed to browbeat and bully them to his heart's content, and their usual custom had been to take refuge in a flood of tears, but this girl was made of different stuff.

He had come prepared to speak sharply in regard to her folly in opposing his wishes; and had expected she would so "weaken" as to humbly sue for his forgiveness. But now, on the contrary, she was as defiant as though not the inmate of a prisoner's cell, accused of a crime, which, if she was convicted, would surely send her to Sing Sing—a fate almost as terrible as death itself to such a girl.

"Why do you come here if not to float over the evil that you have done?" she demanded. "I did not wish to see you, and if I had been consulted in the matter I should decidedly have refused my sanction to this interview. But, now that you are here, say what you have to say as speedily as possible and depart. Your presence is so loathsome that your breath poisons the very air about me."

Fiercely and ringing with passion came the words, while the man fairly quailed beneath the storm which he had evoked.

"My dear Miss Leigh, you ought not to speak in this way, and to me, too. Why, I am a friend—as good a friend as you have in the world!"

"You my friend?" and she fastened such a look of scorn upon him that Walaker, for all his reserve of impudence, felt meaner and more uncomfortable than ever before in his life.

"Yes, I—I am sure I am your friend," he stammered. "I am certain I have nothing but good wishes for you, and I would gladly do anything in my power to aid you. You have only to call upon me to command my aid."

"Open my prison doors!" she exclaimed, with the air of a tragedy queen, and yet withal so earnest and graceful, that there was nothing forced and unnatural about it, and as she spoke she waved her hand toward the iron portal.

"That is exactly what I have come to speak about!" he answered, glad of an opportunity to explain the scheme which he had in his head. "I wished to disabuse your mind of false impressions. I perceive you look upon me in the light of an enemy!" and the old scoundrel assumed the expression of one horrified at being thus mistaken.

"And are you not my enemy?" demanded Esther, her proud lips curling in contempt at this attempt to hoodwink her.

"Your enemy!" he exclaimed. "How can you say such a thing! Why, Miss Esther, you haven't a better friend in all this wide world than John Jefferson Walaker!"

"You have a very strange way of showing your friendship. Accusing a helpless, almost friendless girl of a dreadful crime is not the way for a man to prove that he wishes her well; on the contrary, it is the art of an enemy who wishes to malign and destroy her."

"You wrong me, upon my soul! I am aware circumstances seem against me, but I trust I can set myself right, if you will but listen to me."

Esther bowed, but the look in her eyes was one of distrust.

"That miserable check which has made all this trouble, was not brought to me at first, or else I should have quietly put it in my pocket until I could have seen you, and procured an explanation; but the woman who had it, the boarding-house keeper, carried it to the office, and of course was directed to the book-keeper, the treasurer, who attends to such things. As he had filled out the check, he immediately saw

how it had been altered, so summoned an officer, and put the affair in his hands. That, of course, was the correct thing, as a business man, for him to do; and as he had done it in other cases of a similar nature, and had been commended by me for his zeal, of course when he came to me with intelligence of what he had done, I could not mend matters, and was forced to allow things to take their own course.

"I consulted my lawyer about it, and he said that under the circumstances I had better not interfere openly. The warrant was out for your arrest, and in the hands of the officer; and then, too, another fact came to my knowledge which inclined me to let the matter go on. My nephew, Martin—you remember him, of course, the foreman of the bindery, the somewhat ill-looking fellow, who, I understand, rather forced his attentions on you while you were employed in my establishment—Martin and I had words about the case. Knowing how I was impressed with your charms, in some mysterious way he found out that you were going to be married to this Mr. Dudley, so came, and rather crowded over me on account of it, his idea being that if he couldn't get you himself, he would rather anybody should win than I.

"Now, I will say to you frankly, Esther, the moment I heard of this Dudley business, I distrusted the man, for young men of position and fortune rarely marry poor young girls; it is only old simpletons like myself who commit such folly, as the world terms it. I thought the man meant to wrong you, and I was determined to interfere. I will admit that a selfish motive was at the bottom of the interference. I was not willing that any man but myself should possess the glorious treasure of your love. I set at once to work to find out all I could about this Dudley, and my agents discovered enough to make it tolerably certain that the man is one who will bear a great deal of watching. In fact, it is more than suspected that he is not a person of either position or fortune, but on the contrary, is an adventurer, whose chief stock in trade is his wits—small capital to do a large business upon. It may be possible there is nothing really bad about him, except that he is a fraud as far as his pretensions are concerned, but I was satisfied that he was no man to become possessed of such a jewel as yourself, and so made up my mind to save you from him by allowing the law to take its way. You see I frankly lay bare my motives."

"And you would see me go to prison rather than have me marry the man I liked?" she demanded.

"Oh, no; that is where my strategy comes in!" the old hypocrite replied with a cunning chuckle. "I saved you from him in order that I might get you myself."

"I do not understand you."

"Why, this whole affair is in my hands, now. The prosecuting attorney is a particular friend, who will be glad to do anything to oblige me. I can push the case forward or hold it back just as I will. It was through me the postponement came about; the lawyers were ready and the case could just as well go ahead as not; but now that you understand how things are, you see why I was not anxious to have matters progress—why I wanted the case to remain *in statu quo*. I simply desired a chance to talk to you—to explain everything and let you know that I control your fate. If I do not choose to move in the matter, the prosecution will be dropped and you will go forth free, without a stain on your name."

"Ah, yes; I perceive! You come to make a bargain with me," the girl observed calmly, although her bosom was tumultuous with rage.

"Exactly; now you put it in the right light; I am glad you are becoming sensible," and Walaker rubbed his hands gleefully.

"What are the conditions?"

"Merely to accept the offer I made you, that is all. Much better than Sing Sing!"

"Much worse!" cried Esther, her wrath now flaming forth. "You miserable old wretch! I see, now, it is true, what I have suspected. I am the victim of your own fiendish plot, but you have planned in vain, for I would sooner put my neck in the hangman's rope than dwell for one hour under your roof! You have your answer and now begone! I loathe, despise and hate you, you old villain!"

Walaker ground his teeth with rage.

"Wait until you are convicted and then you may be glad to make terms with me," and crestfallen he slunk away.

CHAPTER XVII.

A LITTLE OF THE PAST.

THE telegraph girl was so bewildered by this unexpected accusation that her brain was in a whirl when she entered the carriage.

Knowing that she was innocent of all wrongdoing she could not imagine by what strange accident so damaging an accusation had been brought against her.

The detective, who had so kindly volunteered to see her through, endeavored to cheer her up.

"Don't be down-hearted, little girl! You'll come out all right in the long run; I feel sure

of it, because you look like a pretty good sort of a girl who would not be up to such tricks."

"Indeed, sir, I do not understand this matter at all. My accounts have always been right; no complaint has ever been made about them, as far as I know, and it seems so strange that I should be arrested and hurried off like a criminal, without the slightest warning."

"It is done so that your confederates won't be warned by you and be able to escape," the second detective observed.

"I haven't any confederates and I am amazed that suspicion should have attached itself to me."

"The boss was determined to catch you all red-handed this time," the Western Union detective interposed, with a chuckle. "At the slightest hint of a rumpus the birds would have flown; but I reckon we can nab the ones we want yet."

"Don't you mind him miss," the other remarked, "that is only his brag. He's trying to scare you into a confession. What he lacks in proof he will make up in blowing."

"I cannot confess what I do not know," the girl replied, and leaned back against the cushions wearily.

The carriage went on up Chatham, and then, with a sudden twist, plunged into a narrow side-street leading toward the river.

Frances bent forward to look out, for she was astonished that such a route should be selected. This was the opportunity for which the two men had been waiting, and they were quick to improve it.

The detective, who had vowed to befriend her, and who was sitting on the back seat by her side, passed his arm around her neck and drew her close up to him, while, with his broad palm placed over her mouth, he stifled the cry that rose to her lips.

The other, who was sitting facing the girl, slipped a bottle and a sponge from his pocket, applied the pungent-smelling liquid to the sponge and clapped it to her nostrils.

And now, too late, she comprehended the truth; the accusation and arrest were all a trick, the two men were confederates and she had been abducted!

Vain were her struggles, pinioned as she was in bands of iron like toughness. The powerful drug soon took effect, her senses deserted her, and all was a blank.

How long she remained in this state of insensibility she knew not; nor was she conscious of aught that occurred during that time, but when she recovered she found herself lying upon a bed of straw in an apartment utterly destitute of all furniture, and lighted by a small lantern, swinging from a hook attached to one of the beams overhead.

The walls were composed of rough stones; and in the center of one side was a massive door, made of unplanned planks, but no sign of a window. The floor was cemented, and from this, coupled with the fact that the air was reeking with vapors, Tick Tick came to the conclusion that she was in a cellar.

"In Heaven's name!" cried Tick Tick, gazing about her, utterly bewildered, "why have I been immured in this horrible place? Why has this outrage been perpetrated, and by whom?"

Speedily was the question destined to be answered. There came a sound at the door, as though some one was fumbling with the lock outside.

Frances sprung to her feet to the center of the floor.

There was the sound of a key turning in the lock; then the grating noise of two heavy bolts moving from their sockets.

The door opened, disclosing the face and form of—Almon Dudley.

The truth flashed upon her, and she wondered at her own blindness in not having been able to guess it before. The man was her enemy—the only one whom she had in the world, and, despite the fact that she had denied her identity in the ferry-house meeting, yet she knew he was not convinced.

Dudley now was dressed in common, rough clothes, and wore an old slouch hat pulled over his brows. He closed the door, then regarded the girl with an earnest gaze for a moment.

"You remember me, I see," he said at last.

"Yes, sir," she answered, hesitatingly.

"Exactly; as I remember you, although a number of years have passed since our last meeting."

The girl merely shook her head.

"Humph! Do you mean still to deny that we are old acquaintances?" he demanded.

"I do not see how you can labor under such a mistake," she replied, with an air of candor.

"Ah, but I am not laboring under any mistake!" he cried. "It is you who make a mistake when you think you can make me doubt the evidence of my own senses. You have changed wonderfully, I admit, but you are still the same woman; and, cunningly as you have altered your personal appearance, I recognized you the moment my eyes fell upon your face. Your hair, which was once of a golden tinge, you have cut short and dyed, but your violet

eyes are still the same, and those eyes I would most surely have recognized even if all the rest of your face had been hidden. In this world, Mildred Dockall, we are often more apt to remember those we have wronged than those who wrong us. In the past, I acknowledge, I wronged you most foully; and I will not lie to you by saying that I am sorry for it, because I am not. I have a heart of steel and a will of iron, and it is my boast that, no matter what the obstacles in my way, I go straight to my aim. I do not pretend to be a saint, and to those who know me it would be useless to deny that I am as big a rascal as walks the earth. You see, I am quite candid, even if uncomplimentary, but I never spare myself any more than I spare anybody else. You can bear witness to the fact that I didn't spare you. I am thoroughly for myself alone, and believe in taking care of No. 1; let all the rest of the world go hang so long as I thrive. And I am thriving; but now, like a specter from the past, you rise in my path, and if I do not miss my guess, you intend to give me trouble."

"How can a poor girl like myself trouble such a man as you are?"

"A question I cannot very well answer; but that you will find a way to trouble me, I am certain. In fact, since we met, I have an idea spies have been dogging my footsteps, and for this little attention I am, probably, indebted to you."

"Why should I trouble myself about you?"

"Because you are a woman, and, womanlike, you burn to avenge the wrong I did you long ago. I don't blame you; if I were in your place, I should probably do the same; but I shall blame myself, though, if I do not take measures to guard against your attacks. I used you as a child uses a toy, and when the occasion was past, I flung you aside, bruised and broken. I thought you would not survive the shock, but you have, and now you rise out of the dim past to torment me."

"I see it is useless to attempt to reason you out of this crazy belief!" the girl protested.

"Quite useless; and that is the reason why I have taken all this trouble to bring you here. I am on the eve of making a big strike and cannot afford to have you come between me and my plans. If I make my *coup* and win my stake, then, perhaps, I will be able to come to some arrangement with you, for to tell you the honest truth, Mildred, I am afraid of your malice. I am afraid that if I do not tie your hands you will deal me a blow that will shatter my house of cards and perhaps even endanger my life. Think over this matter; if you will agree to leave the country perhaps we may come to some understanding. I don't want to kill you, but I must be made safe. Now that you know how matters stand I will leave you to meditate over them. For the present fear not, but if you defy me, and if evil comes, blame only yourself."

Then Dudley withdrew, fastening the door securely behind him.

In truth Tick Tick was in a terrible plight.

CHAPTER XVIII.

ON THE SCENT.

WILLY WOOLLEY, as we have had occasion to see, was a remarkably bright boy for one of his years. Possibly it was owing to his having been thrown early upon the world and forced to look out for himself. Parents he had never known. Reared by charity, he had been obliged to look out for himself from the time when he was "knee-high to a rat's tail," as he expressed it. The street life of a great city is like a hot-house; it forces forward its human plants with wonderful rapidity, so the boy developed a keenness and sagacity beyond his years. Like all the street urchins, he was suspicious, mistrusting every man's motive and watching always for enemies rather than friends.

But for all his precocious alertness in scenting danger, he never suspected anything wrong about the arrest of Tick Tick, until the carriage drove by him and he discovered that it was empty!

Then the truth flashed upon him.

"Well, may I be kicked to death by cripples if there ain't something wrong about this here thing!" coming from his hiding-place and gazing, open-mouthed, after the coach. "You kin bet your boots this ain't a square thing! Blamed if I don't believe this is all a put up job to carry off Frankie, and that neither one of them fellers is a detective! If it is all right and reg'lar, what are they doing down in this dirty street! I reckon the president of the Western Union Telegraph Company don't hang out in no sich hole as this."

It was plain to the boy now that the arrest was merely a cunning trick to induce the girl to go with them without resisting. The second man, who said he was a detective from the central office, and who so kindly volunteered to see the girl through, was a confederate of the first, and it was a cunning ruse to allay any suspicion the victim might have.

The carriage had halted in Roosevelt street; all within had got out, and this was the reason why the sound of the wheels had ceased for a few moments.

"Mighty odd that Frankie didn't kick up a row," Willy muttered, as he reflected upon the circumstance. "I should have thought she would have know'd it wasn't all right when the hearse stopped in sich a gutter lane."

But now the question was—what had he best do?

Two courses were open to him. He had taken a good look at the hackman, so he felt sure of being able to recognize the fellow, if he met him again; he could hunt the hackman up and then complain to the proper authorities that he had been concerned in the abduction of the telegraph girl, or he could transform himself into an amateur detective, ascertain what had been done with the captive, and then, if he couldn't procure her release, he could call upon the telegraph company, or the police, to interfere.

This latter course was far more agreeable to him than the former, and he resolved to set to work immediately.

As near as he had been able to make out, the coach had halted upon the opposite side of the street and at a point about twenty houses down.

The exact spot where the hack had pulled up, of course he could not determine, but judged that when he came to examine the surroundings he could make a pretty good guess at it; so he sauntered carelessly down the ill-smelling street, keeping a vigilant eye upon the houses on the opposite side.

When he came near the spot where he decided the hack had halted, he discovered only an old stable, tightly shut and apparently deserted.

"That's my mutton!" exclaimed Willy the moment his eyes fell upon the old barracks. "That's the werry identical place! I'll bet four dollars and a half that Frankie is hid away in there, and if she is, I'll have her out in no time, or else I'm a tin-eared galoot, and no good!"

But Willy was shrewd enough to understand that he could not hope to accomplish anything in the detective line until he assumed some disguise. It would never do to loiter around Roosevelt street in the uniform of a telegraph boy.

So he hurried to his quarters. There he selected an old suit of clothes and proceeded, by sundry skillful tears and rips, to make it still more dilapidated; then he donned it, and tore an old cap half to pieces to serve for head-gear, and finished up by rubbing his hands on his shoes and then over his face, to give the true street-boy look.

Looking in the glass, he felt satisfied that his disguise was perfect.

"Blessed if I believe Frankie herself would know me now!" he cried, in delight. "Now, then, what is my game?" he mused, as he walked along, retracing his steps toward Roosevelt street. "I'm a helpless orphan, in course, without any 'fadder or mudder,' and no place for to sleep. I used to black boots, but some big boys stole der box an' all der stock in trade. I guess I can talk the platter 'wid' any gutter-snipe in the city."

Next door to the old stable was a dilapidated two-storied brick house, occupied, for the windows were curtained, and yet not fairly swarming with life, as was the case with almost every other house in the locality.

Willy, confident in the completeness of his disguise, went and sat down upon the steps of this house to take a good look at the old stable.

"I must buy some lead-pencils and a few boxes of matches," the boy soliloquized, "and make believe peddle them, and then I'll have an excuse for hanging 'round."

The boy's scrutiny did not profit him any, for, as far as he could discover, there was nothing about the place to indicate that it had been entered in "a dog's age," as he declared, but while he was meditating the door of the house opened, and a short, thick-set, ill-looking man came out.

Willy was on the alert in an instant.

"Gimme a penny for to buy something to eat," he whined. "Help a poor orphan boy along w'ot ain't got any fadder or mudder, nor nobody, nor nuffin!"

"Go 'long! you're a fraud!" replied the man.

"I wish I may die if I am! I ain't had anythink to eat this blessed day!"

"You can get plenty of water down to the City Hall, swill yourself full, and then you won't want anything to eat," advised the man with a grin.

"W'ot's water to a growing boy?" protested Willy, with an injured air. "I wants good beefsteak, I does, with plenty of gravy, and a dumpling."

"Quail on toast, or venison with currant jelly, would suit you, I suppose?"

"You kin bet all your ducats on that!" with a grin.

"You are a nice, healthy kind of a chap to be whining and begging 'bout the streets, anyway," the man remarked. "Why in thunder don't you get something to do?"

"What kin a poor cove do who ain't got no friends, nor nuffin?"

"Fadder and mother gone up the spout?"

"Never had any, as I knows on."

"Oh, you are trying to fool me, now!"

"No, honest Injun; wish I may die if it ain't the blessed truth."

"You wouldn't do any work if you could get it?"

"Jest you show me some work, and see if I wouldn't! Mebbe you won't believe me; but I go 'round the city all day long, a huntin' for work—"

"And a-praying that you won't find it."

"Well, you show me some work, and see how quick I'll tackle it! Say, don't you want a boy in your shebang here, for to do chores, run errands, or something? I ain't 'ticular 'bout wages; all I want is my grub an' a bed."

"And I reckon you'll lay out to steal the rest, eh?"

"So help me, Bob! I wouldn't steal anythink—"

"Out of your reach, I s'pose. Well, sonny, I've a good mind to give you a trial—that is, if you know enough to keep a still tongue in your head."

"You bet you kin trust me. Jest give me a trial."

"Come in, then; I'll give you a bite and a bunk, and to-morrow we'll see what you are made of, my pippin."

Willy followed the fellow into the house, the smile turning his dirty face into a young light-house.

CHAPTER XIX.

A SURPRISE.

THE entry within was perfectly dark, but Willy fearlessly followed his guide. He regarded it as a stroke of fortune, this getting into the house, being satisfied that Tick Tick was somewhere in the neighborhood, and now felt sure of finding out exactly where she was.

"Follow me and don't be afraid," said the guide; "if you fall and break your neck, you will know it as soon as any one."

"Oh, I ain't skeered. The cove w'ot is born to be hung will never be drowned!"

"Right you are, youngster, every time! Look out here! there's a flight of stairs. I'm going to take you down in the basement and give you something to eat."

"And jolly glad I'll be to get it, for my stomach is so empty that I b'lieve I could eat an elephant."

"Well, I ain't got any elephants on hand just now, but if some cold fried tripe will suit you—"

"Bully! I jest dotes on fried tripe!" cried the boy, smacking his lips as if really suffering for food.

Then there was the sound of a door opening, creaking on rusty hinges.

"Feel your way along the wall until you come to the door," said the man; "I don't want you to go down head-first, 'cos you might break your neck, and then the perlice would come in and say as how I murdered you for your money—ho, ho!"

And Willy chuckled, too, at the j. ke.

"I reckon you couldn't make more than a quarter out of me, rags and all, unless you sold me for a stiff arter you cooked my goose."

"Sell you for a stiff, eh?" observed the man, beginning to descend the stairs; "well, that ain't bad. I never should have thought of that! It's a bully good idea; there's money in it! and it takes your corpus out of the way, so if the perlice should happen to come nosin' round they will only have their trouble for their pains; ho, ho, ho!"

And the man laughed in such a horrible way that it chilled the boy like the touch of an icy hand, and for the first time a suspicion flashed upon him that he might be in a trap; the old story of the engineer hoist by his own petard; instead of tricking the man, the boot was on the other leg—the fellow was tricking him; like the unfortunate fly, he had walked into the parlor of the spider.

But it was too late to retreat; he was in the trap—if it was a trap—and must go on.

The stairway was a narrow, rickety one, inclosed on both sides, and it creaked dismally under their weight—so dismally that Willy very naturally concluded that few human feet had used it for years.

When the bottom was finally reached the air was damp and oppressive—more like the atmosphere of a charnel-house than any place else.

"Now, turn right round to the left when you get to the foot of the stairs, and feel your way along the wall on your right until you come to the door; it's only a few steps; I'm standing in the doorway now," said the guide.

"All right, governor; I'm fly!" spoken cheerfully, although the horrible suspicion that he had fallen into a trap was almost a conviction. All the stories he had heard about boys being decoyed away and never being heard of again came up in his memory, yet for consolation he couldn't remember any instance of a "gutter-snipe" being made a victim.

He found the doorway without difficulty and groped his way into the room.

"Look out you don't bunk up against the furniture," cautioned the man, and Willy, to his astonishment, fancied that the voice came from behind him.

"All right, sir," he replied.

"You're in?"

"Yes, sir."

Then there came the sound of a door shutting.

"Hallo!" cried the man; "why did you shut the door?"

Now, Willy felt sure the man himself had closed the door, and he knew that he indeed had walked into his own prison.

"I didn't touch the door," he answered, doggedly.

"Didn't you? Well, maybe it was the wind, ho, ho!" and the guide laughed hoarsely. "The wind is very strong in this basement sometimes. It don't matter, though; I'll strike a light and then we can see where we are."

Scratching a match dexterously against the leg of his pantaloons the fellow lit a small lantern suspended on a hook in the ceiling.

The boy looked around him. Instead of a basement he was in a cellar about ten feet square, surrounded on all sides by stone walls, without a window, and broken only by a stout wooden door. In front of this door the man had seated himself upon a stool, the only piece of furniture in the room, without a bundle of straw lying in one corner could be classed in that category, and as he caught the eyes of the boy looking around him in a state of bewilderment, he burst into a loud laugh.

"Well, my pippin, what do you think of this here?" he asked.

"I don't know w'ot to think of it," Willy answered, with perfect truthfulness.

"Nice old basement, eh?"

"Looks a heap sight more like a prison to me."

"Very particular you are, ain't yer?" cried the man, with a grin. "Well, it's a good enough basement for to keep you in!"

"W'ot do you mean?" demanded the boy.

"Jest w'ot I sed; this will be as good a cage to keep you in as you kin find anywheres in this big city."

"To keep me in?" and the boy's look of stolid wonderment was perfect.

"Oh, yes; you're a smart kid, but you have got into a game this time that's altogether too big for you."

"Well, boss, I reckoned I was fly to almost anything, but you are too much for me this time."

"W'ot's yer name, anyway?"

Willy hesitated. Cunning as he was he had not thought of a name, for the idea that he should need another than his own had not entered his head.

"W'ot do you want to know my name for?" he asked. "Mebbe you want to git me into some trouble."

"You will git into some, mighty sudden, now, I tell yer, if you don't spit out yer name!" the man exclaimed, and he shook his clinched fist menacingly.

"Me name is Jake!" the lad answered, blubbering.

"Shet up yer noise! Jake w'ot? You've got some other name 'side Jake, ain't yer?"

"Yes, sir; Jake Smith."

"Smith is a very good name. Take it altogether Jake Smith is a fine name. I couldn't have made up a better one on the spur of the moment myself; but I say, my covey, that chicken won't fight! Yer little game won't work!"

"I ain't got no little game, 'cept to get something to eat."

"Well, this is the first time I ever knew the Western Union Telegraph Company starved its boys, the tormentor remarked, a cruel smile upon his coarse face, and a wicked light in his evil eyes.

The blow came so unexpectedly that, capital actor as the boy was, he could not repress a start of surprise.

The man was on the watch, and perceiving it he chuckled maliciously.

"Well, my covey, that shot took you clean in the bread-basket, didn't it? You wasn't lookin' for it, but didn't I tell yer this game is too big for you to git into and you had better swim out! You are a smart leetle chap, Mister Willy Woolley, but in this here thing you ain't as smart as you think you are!"

The boy's heart sunk within him; his worst fears were realized; he had been recognized!

"I see'd yer when you had yer uniform on, a-spying on the other side of the street, and I knew you in a minute when you came back in these togs. I s'picioned that you wanted to get into the house, and now that you are in how do you like it as far as you've got?"

"Boss, I ain't the cove at all!" cried Willy, determined not to own up.

"We'll keep you here until we find out," responded the man, with another grin. Then he rose and retreated to the door. "There's a nice bed of straw for you in the corner, and I'll bring you grub in the morning. So-long!"

The door closed and Willy was alone.

CHAPTER XX.

A LUCKY DISCOVERY.

THE man had been merciful enough to leave the light, and so not add the horrors of darkness to the rest of the evils that encompassed

the unlucky lad, and for even this slight boon Willy was truly thankful.

The moment the door closed behind the jailer he sprang forward and placed his ear to it. His idea was to ascertain how the door was fastened upon the outside, for already the astute gamin had made up his mind that by hook or crook he would escape from the cage into which he had so blindly walked.

He heard the rusty key turn in the old-fashioned but powerful lock; then a bolt, which, like the lock, was apparently rusty from long disuse, was forced into its socket in the upper part of the door; a second bolt, which creaked like its companion, was shot home in the lower part of the wooden guard to the portal.

Two bolts and the bar of a stout lock lay between himself and freedom!

Willy listened attentively for the purpose of ascertaining whether his jailer proposed remaining in the neighborhood, or betaking himself to the upper region. To the young prisoner's satisfaction he heard the man's footsteps retreat and gradually die away in the distance. Feeling sure that the jailer had gone, and was not playing a trick upon him by pretending to depart, but in reality concealing himself somewhere, the boy breathed more freely.

"They got me here easily enough, but I will just show them that they can't keep me; and when they come to bring me my grub wouldn't it make 'em open their eyes for to discover that Willy Woolley, esquire, was among the missing? And now you can just bet your boots, too, that Frankie is in this here den somewheres. Instead of the old stable this house is the place, though I didn't suspicion the house. But, arter all, how am I to get out of this? and I ain't got even as much as a pocket-knife to help me. If I was Jack Sheppard now I would get out some way; he never had many tools; a rusty nail was as good to him as a crowbar."

A rusty nail!

This thought put an idea into his head.

The bottom of the cellar was earth and although it was packed hard as cement by long usage, yet Willy felt convinced that with a proper tool he could dig a passage.

"Oh, for a nail! my kingdom for a nail!" he cried, theatrically striking an attitude.

His first endeavor was to get down the lantern so as to be able to examine the apartment thoroughly, but the lantern was so fastened to the beam from which it hung that it could not be moved.

Then the plucky boy got down on his hands and knees and began a minute search, and fortune deigned to smile upon him.

In a corner of the cellar, literally imbedded in the earth, he found a broken table-knife. The handle was all right and about one-third of the blade still remained.

"Oh, ain't this jest prime!" he cried, jumping to his feet and executing a jig. "Now, if I don't get out of this den you can call me a mut-ton-head!" and forthwith he set to work.

At first the task seemed hopeless, for the earth at the door was as hard as stone, but by sticking to it Willy finally penetrated the top crust and then struck the softer earth, so that he made the dirt fly like a shower, until at last the hole under the door became large enough to allow the boy to worm himself through serpent fashion.

But when he got on the outside and found himself in utter darkness, he realized that he must obtain the lantern, for without its aid he would never be able to find his way out of the underground region.

"And it's got to be did, too," he muttered, "for I've got to look for Frankie, and a pretty fist I would make of it, groping around in the darkness like a blind bat. Yes, sir-ee! that lantern has got to come down!" and as he stretched out his hand to give emphasis to the declaration, his fingers touched the key which the jailer had left in the lock.

Willy was so delighted at this that he could hardly keep from yelling outright, for now being able to re-enter the apartment from the outside, he would carefully fill up the hole which he had dug so that all traces of the manner in which he had succeeded in getting out would be obliterated, and he laughed when he reflected how puzzled his jailer would be when he came in the morning.

After the hole was filled and the place restored to its normal condition, the boy was lucky enough to find a barrel outside by means of which he was enabled to reach the lantern and, with the aid of the broken knife, to wrench it loose.

Then, quitting the cell, he carefully locked and bolted the door behind him, so that no one would have been able to tell that it had been disturbed since the jailer quitted the apartment.

"Now for Frankie!" he exclaimed, in high glee, feeling very much like a hero; "I'm willing to bet a month's salary that she ain't far off!"

With the aid of the lantern he took a survey of the premises. The cellar was apparently divided into three parts by solid stone walls, so Willy judged, for the apartment from which he

had just escaped was one; the center division where he now stood, and from which the stairs led to the floor above, was another. In the wall opposite was a locked and bolted door, exactly like the one through which he had come, and this he surmised led to a third apartment, similar to the other two.

"By gum! I'll bet a hat that Frankie is in there!" he exclaimed, the moment his eyes fell upon the door, and straightway he proceeded to it, hoping to find the key in the lock, but there was no such good luck.

"Now I must be careful not to call too loud," he murmured, as he rapped on the door, "or else I may be overheard by them galoots upstairs, and then I'll have a hornet's nest around my ears."

After rapping softly he put his ear to the keyhole and listened; not a sound came from within.

"Mebbe this leads out into the back yard," he thought; so he placed his eye to the keyhole, and as there was a light burning within, he could easily distinguish that his first guess was correct. It was just such another apartment as the one in which he had been confined.

"If there ain't anybody in there what have they got the light burning for, I should like to know? Mebbe she is asleep."

Putting his mouth to the keyhole he called out as loud as he dared:

"Frankie—oh, Frankie! Don't be skeered; it is only me, Willy!"

Then the quick ears of the lad caught a noise coming from within the apartment that sounded like the rustling of straw.

"That's her, and she's been asleep on a straw shake-down like the feller had for me," Willy muttered. "Hey, Frankie! Come to the door; it's all O. K.; don't be afraid; I'm here to get you out!"

The sound of light steps within the room and the rustle of a woman's dress, came to his ears, and then a well-known voice said:

"Is that you, Willy?"

It was the voice of Tick Tick, the telegraph girl.

"I've struck the bonanza first lick!" the boy muttered, in great glee, cutting a dextrous pigeon-wing as he spoke. "Oh, I'm a daisy, you bet!"

CHAPTER XXI.

SENTENCED.

COUNSELOR HARE had become very much interested in the case of Esther Leigh. In the first place, he had received a liberal fee, and Dudley, in the off-hand, generous manner peculiar to him, had assured the lawyer that if he could succeed in getting the girl acquitted he might name his own price for the service; and secondly, the matter puzzled him; he could not, with all his professional knowledge and experience, decide whether the girl was really innocent of the crime imputed to her, or was an old hand at the business, who trusted by some hook or crook to get off.

The only thing the man of law had to work upon was the girl's statement in regard to the persecution of her by the proprietor of the bindery.

If her story was true, it would show that some one would have a motive for injuring her. And the counselor, in the course of his extensive practice, had been employed in half a dozen cases where, to serve private and personal malice, charges of theft had been made, and the accuser had relied for conviction upon the fact of the stolen articles being found on the person accused, or concealed in their possession, and in almost every case it had been proven that the person who made the charge held malice against the party accused, and had ample opportunity to secrete the articles alleged to have been stolen in the places where they had been found.

Now in this case it was possible that the girl was speaking the truth when she said she had never noticed whether the check was made out for six dollars or for sixty, and that all she had done was to write her name across the back, as the boarding-housekeeper had informed her was necessary.

If the girl had altered the check, and was an old hand at the business, her giving the check to the boarding-housekeeper was a stupid blunder, for she might have known a woman of that class would immediately become suspicious of a check for so large an amount, and, naturally, would institute inquiries in regard to it; but, if the girl was innocent, giving the check to the woman and requesting her to return the change for her was the most natural thing in the world.

And if Esther was innocent, either the clerk who drew the check, and who placed it in the envelope, lied when he said it was for six dollars only, or else the envelope containing this particular check was tampered with after it had left his hands and before it reached the girl. One man only had the chance to perform that act—old Walaker, the party who bore the girl a grudge, and who, in his anger, would be very apt to seize upon any chance to do the maiden who had scorned his suit a mischief.

But, believing this to be the solution of the

mystery, and proving it to be so to the satisfaction of a judge and jury were two different things, as the able lawyer well knew.

One thing was certain—if the girl was the victim of a cruel wrong, the secret of the mystery was to be found in the book-bindery of John Jefferson Walaker.

So, faithful to his promise to Esther, the counselor put one of his clerks on the scent—a little, oily-tongued gentleman, who, in the detective line, had few superiors in the country. He answered to the name of Harry Anchenden.

After a careful week's work, he reappeared to report.

"Well, governor, I think I have picked up all that can be got at in this matter," he said.

"Sit down and unfold yourself," responded the lawyer waving him to a chair, and at the same time motioning him to close the door carefully behind him.

"Governor, I am sorry to say that I think I might as well have gone off on a spree for all the intelligence I have picked up."

"Well, go ahead and let me have it; a small rope will sometimes hang a large man."

"In this case I reckon my rope would break under the weight of a fair-sized cat."

"Propell! Trifles light as air sometimes betray us into deepest consequences," suggested the lawyer.

The detective had been made acquainted with Esther's story in regard to the jealousy among the bindery girls on account of the alleged favors extended to Miss Leigh by the proprietor and the foreman, and, as he explained, his first efforts were confined to finding out how much truth there was in this statement.

"Well, I found that the girl's statement was true," he announced. "The girls in the bindery were all jealous of her on account of the marked favor shown to her by the proprietor, old Walaker, and the foreman, Martin Walaker, who is a nephew of the old man."

"Well, how was it? Were both men after the girl and yet on amicable terms?"

"Oh, no; there had been trouble between them. As near as I can ascertain, there has never been any love lost between old Walaker and his nephew, at any time, but the young man keeps his situation in the bindery simply because he is too stubborn to give it up, and the old man don't dare to get rid of him, for he knows he can't get another man to attend to the work as well as his nephew can. The old uncle charged the young man with being after the girl, and the nephew replied that that was his business and no one else's, and when he wished advice he would ask for it. Then there were a few hot words between the two, and the old chap, who got rather the worst of the encounter, retired, swearing that his nephew shouldn't marry the girl, no matter how much he was struck after her."

"A threat, eh?"

"Yes; then I looked into the interview between old Walaker and Miss Leigh when she received the check. There was an interview between the two in the private office, but no one knows what it amounted to except the parties concerned. All I could find out was that the girl came out looking pale and angry, and Walaker immediately gave notice that he had discharged her, although he had previously indicated that she was to keep on working."

"Then his story that he paid her by check because it was her last week, is rather thin?"

"Very gauzy, my lord! I am satisfied he hadn't the least idea of getting rid of the girl until he had trouble with her."

"Then you think her account of the interview is correct?"

"I do; he told her that he thought a good deal of her; she wouldn't have it, and he sacked her."

"And the check business was worked by him on purpose to get square with the young lady for her rejection of his suit, and at the same time to keep her away from his nephew?"

"My noble duke, you have hit the nail right square on the head, the first whack!"

"The fellow who drew the check, then, was in with the old man?"

"Nary time!" replied the other, tersely. "He was the next party to whom I turned my attention; and, general, that young man is as square as a die, all the time! William Sneed is his name, and he is really a model young man; none of your sham, goody-goody young chaps; but the clear, white article, and no mistake. Rather a dull fellow about some things; but one of the straightforward, honest kind that I don't believe you could hire to do anything wrong for a million of dollars."

"A million is a good deal of money," the counselor observed, doubtfully.

"It wouldn't buy this man; if Walaker had offered him the whole bindery he wouldn't have sworn falsely about that check. He made the check out for six dollars, payable to Esther Leigh's order; laid it before the boss with a lot of others for his signature; it was signed, and without any alteration was put into the envelope—"

"I see," interrupted Hare, "and then given back to Walaker."

"Precisely; and he opened the envelope,

changed the six into sixty, with malice prepense, in order to get the girl in a hole, sealed it up again, and paid it to her."

"And we can prove this?" cried the lawyer. "Nary time!" responded the other, laconically.

"That's bad," and the counselor looked annoyed.

"Very bad; but such is life! The old coon fixed the job so cunningly that it would defy Satan and all his imps to prove it against him."

"There isn't any chance to save her then, innocent though she is?"

"Not a chance unless old Walaker is seized with a fit of remorse, and refuses to prosecute."

But Walaker didn't do anything of the kind.

Whether the theory which the criminal lawyer's detective worked out was true or false, it mattered not, for the old book-binder appeared at the trial, pressed the prosecution forward with all his might, and the result was that, after a very brief trial indeed, Esther Leigh was convicted of the crime of which she stood accused, and sentenced to the State Prison for three years—a light sentence, as the judge informed her, considering the gravity of her crime; but, as it was apparently her first offense, he was disposed to be merciful.

And the girl did not faint upon being sentenced; she merely stood like a statue, sustained by her indomitable will, the prettiest woman who had ever been sentenced in that court.

CHAPTER XXII.

UNHAPPY "JUSTICE."

AFTER she was sentenced Esther was returned to her cell. She had three days before started on her journey up the river to the gloomy pile which, according to the stern law's decree, was to be her home for the next three years.

Dudley had consulted the lawyer immediately after the trial to know if something else could not be done: "Never mind what it costs! I would rather pay ten thousand dollars than have this helpless young woman sent to prison!"

"My dear sir, ten times ten thousand wouldn't save her now," the counselor responded, with a solemn shake of the head. "She had a fair trial and was convicted on the evidence. There wasn't a flaw in the case from beginning to end upon which the keenest lawyer could base an exception or found an appeal."

"But it is an outrageous perversion of justice! That girl is as innocent of the deed as either you or I!"

"I agree with you there. I am satisfied she did not commit the crime, but the evidence was dead against her, and I don't believe there were ten people in the court-room who didn't believe she was guilty. Hard lines, Mr. Dudley; from the bottom of my heart I sincerely pity the young lady, and I would do anything for her, free of cost, for I have become interested in the case; but as I have said—the way is completely blocked in all directions."

From the lawyer's office Dudley hastened to the prison cell, where he found Esther calmly engaged in reading. Through the kindness of the prison matron she had been provided with reading matter. The girl was a riddle to all the prison people. She was such a perfect lady, so utterly unlike the general run of women who were unfortunate enough to be incarcerated there; and yet there did not seem to be a doubt of her guilt.

Esther rose and received her lover with outstretched hands and a quiet smile, but when he attempted to kiss her she turned her head aside.

"No, no," she said; "I cannot bring myself to receive marks of your affection while this stain is upon my name."

"But I know you are not guilty!" he protested. "Why, Esther, I have never doubted your innocence for a single moment."

"You may be blinded by your affection for me; every one else believes me to be guilty," and she sighed deeply.

"Oh, no; you are wrong there; nobody who knows you believes you committed the act of which you stand accused."

"And convicted; do not forget that! I am more than accused; my guilt has been clearly proven; and even now the prison doors are opening wide to receive me."

"But you shall not remain there!" Dudley hastened to declare. "I have just come from an interview with your lawyer, and am far from giving up all hope."

"But he—even he believes that I am guilty," with a mournful smile.

"Indeed he does not! He feels perfectly convinced of your innocence, although he says, unfortunately, you are entangled in the meshes of a deep-laid plot from which you can only be extricated by some lucky chance; so keep up a good heart; the clouds of misfortune that lower over you may clear away at any moment and without giving the slightest warning. Rest

assured, your departure to serve out the unjust sentence will only serve to nerve your friends to renewed efforts; and if fair means will not avail I can find it in my heart to use foul to get even with this villain who has cast this stain upon your young life. Then, too, there are more ways than one for a prisoner to get out of the State Prison, and I shall not hesitate to avail myself of any chance that may help you."

With these and many more encouraging words Dudley strove to inspire the hapless young woman, and although some of the schemes, to which he darkly alluded, she did not exactly comprehend, yet she felt more peaceful and resigned to her fate after his visit. With strange and rare philosophy for one so young, she had made up her mind to accept her fate, no matter how bitter, without a murmur.

Shortly after Dudley's departure another visitor arrived, and this was the man she most dreaded to see—John Walaker.

Her first impulse, when he entered her cell, was to refuse to converse with him, for she looked upon the old man with the same aversion that would have been excited by a slimy serpent crawling in her way; but then, when he began to express his sorrow at the unfortunate position in which he found her, although she did not believe a single word he said, yet she could not help listening.

"My dear young lady, if you only knew how sorry I am that this affair has gone on in the way it has," he remarked, taking off his hat, seating himself upon the stool, and heaving a deep sigh. "Of course I hadn't the remotest idea of the nature or the extent of the punishment that would be inflicted upon you in case you were convicted."

"Why, you threatened me with the State Prison when you came to see me before, and told me that I would surely be sent there unless I yielded to your wishes and agreed to do your bidding," she replied, looking him straight in the eyes, while a scornful smile curled her expressive lips.

"Of course I know that; you mustn't think I forget anything I say, for I never do; but that was all done for effect. All is fair in love and war, you know; but, really, I didn't have any idea such punishment could be inflicted for such a trumpery offense. If you were convicted—and I felt pretty sure you would be, for the evidence was so strong against you—I supposed a slight fine would be inflicted—which, by the by, I had made up my mind to pay, and so get you out of the scrape," remarked the unblushing old rascal, never wincing under the fire of the girl's angry gaze. "You see, my dear, I would not have allowed the affair to have gone on so far, but I was in the hands of my lawyer, who is a very strict business man; and then, too, I will own that I was angered by your scorn of my humble suit. Of course, it takes all sorts of people to make a world, but ninety-nine girls out of a hundred, situated as you are, would have jumped at the chance which you so scornfully refused."

"In me you found the hundredth girl, then," she observed, her superb face appearing to more advantage with the honest scorn so plainly visible upon it, than when in repose.

"Yes; and now that I know about the infatuation you had, or have, for this Dudley fellow, I can understand the affair better; and in one light, although I am sorry you are suffering, I am glad all this has happened, as it has saved you from making a fool of yourself for life. I have had careful inquiries made in regard to this Almon Dudley, and am convinced he is a scamp of the first water. He appears to have plenty of money, yet no one knows how he gets it. He sets up pretensions of being a Wall Street man, a stock operator, but the men down on 'Change, who are posted, say he is a fraud, and that they don't know anything about him. In fact, from all I can learn, I have an idea his entire capital consists of his wits—that he is one of those well-dressed, smooth-talking adventurers who manage to pick up a living by fleecing greenhorns, even if he does not dabble in deeper crimes. From the clutches of this hawk I have saved you, and you ought to be grateful."

"Oh, I am! and when I occupy my cell in the State Prison, no doubt my mind will often revert to the generous man who was the chief agent in sending me there," replied the girl, with biting sarcasm; and at her words, even the tough old Walaker visibly winced.

"My dear, I did not come here to bandy words with you, nor to exult in your misfortunes, but simply to say to you that I am heartily sorry that things are as they are, and, although no doubt it will be a difficult job, yet, if you are willing, I will try my best to get you released. I have a great deal of influence with certain men high in power in this State, and possibly I can secure a pardon."

"I know an easier way than that," the girl suggested, a peculiar look upon her face.

"Yes? Well, I don't really understand; please explain."

"All you will have to do is to tell the truth!"

"I tell the truth?" and he stared.

"Yes; reveal all the particulars of the vile plot, worthy of the brain of a fiend fresh from the realms of Satan, which you laid to entrap the girl who had spirit enough to refuse your insulting offer, and who plainly told you that your conduct merited the contempt of every honest person that this wide world contains!"

"Oh, you are crazy to make such a charge against me!" the old scamp cried, scrambling to his feet, attempting to assume an indignant look, and yet getting very red in the face.

"You laid a fiendish scheme to entrap me. I was to be your victim or else be hurried off as a convict to the State Prison; so to the prison I go, for I would sooner be there in its deepest, darkest dungeons, than share a palace and all the gold that the world holds with such an ignominious wretch as you are!"

The old man of money hastened out of the cell, purple with rage. He dared not trust himself to speak, being thus scorned and defied.

Esther saw him no more.

In due time she arrived at Sing Sing's gloomy prison, and there, in general charge of the female ward to which she was assigned, she found the man who loved, but seemed to persecute her—Martin Walaker!

CHAPTER XXIII.

A NOVEL ENCOUNTER.

"You can just bet it is me, large as life and twice as natural!" Willy assured, delighted beyond measure that he had succeeded in discovering the whereabouts of Tick Tick, for he recognized her voice the moment she spoke.

"Oh, Willy, how on earth did you succeed in finding out that I was here?" the imprisoned girl asked, speaking through the key-hole.

"Just by accident," and then the boy related all that had occurred since he parted from her. "You see, Frankie," he said in conclusion, "they got me into a trap, but it wasn't strong enough to hold yours truly, William Woolley, esquire."

"What do you intend to do, now?"

"Get you out of this scrape as soon as possible, and that is the kind of a hair-pin I am!"

"Would it not be better for you to make your escape from this den, and then go and inform the police?" the girl questioned.

"Well, I will do just as you say, but I should think that the best thing for me to do would be to get you out as soon as possible, and then we could slide out of here without taking the trouble to say nothing to nobody. You know, Frankie, I'm only a little chap, and maybe the police wouldn't be apt to pay much attention to any yarn that I should spin, and while I was a-trying to persuade 'em to come and get you out of this fix, the coves here might get wind of it, and then all the fat would be in the fire."

"That is very true," Frankie confessed, thoughtfully. There was a sound sense in the boy's surmise. "But, do you think you can get me out?" she added.

"Well, I got myself out without half trying either, and I reckon it will be a good deal easier for me to pull you out of this hole, seeing that I am on the outside, when in my fix I was inside, with a locked and bolted door for to get through," replied Willy, with an air of bravado.

"But this door is also locked and bolted, for I listened when my captor departed, and I don't really see how you are going to open it, unless the key has been left in the lock."

"Do you take me for a first class lunatic?" Willy demanded. "Do you think I would be chinning here all this while, if the key was in the lock, and I hadn't anything to do but to turn it and ask you to walk out? Not much, you bet!"

"But, what will you do?"

"Try the key that is in the door of my dookal palace first," responded the boy. "Maybe it will fit, and if it does, then we will be all hunky."

"But if it doesn't?"

"Then I will have to do for you what I did for myself; take my spade and dig a hole under the door, so you can crawl out."

"Why, have you got a spade? How lucky!"

"It's just the boss spade, I tell you!" and the boy flourished the rusty knife triumphantly in the air. "Celebrated, double jointed, back-action, warranted not to cut in the eye patent spade, invented by William Woolley, esquire! Be sure and get the genuine and don't patronize the other swindler across the way!"

"But, hurry up, Willy; we are losing time; these villains may return at any moment!"

"You don't say so? Did any of the galoots say anything to you about coming back?" inquired the boy, rather alarmed.

"Oh, no; nothing was said to give me the idea; but I thought it might be probable."

"It's all right," Willy exclaimed, feeling relieved at this intelligence. "I guess there ain't much danger of our being troubled to-night, for

the very polite cutthroat that looked arter me p'inted out the bundle of straw and told me it was my bed, and said he would bring me some grub in the morning; so that is good enough to tie to. Oh, we've got the hull night afore us, and if I don't git you out of this afore morning, then I'm a slouch and ain't fit for anything but to be chewed up in shoe-strings or made into tripe!"

"Oh, hurry, Willy, and let us get out of this dreadful place as soon as possible! You have no idea of the terrible danger that threatens me!"

"Well, I ain't anxious to stay here and bunk on straw like a hog—mebbe to make a meal for the rats in the night, and perhaps git nothing but bread and water. Oh, I'll go right to work; I'll try the key fust, and if that don't fit, and I'm skeered it won't, then I'll order spades to the front, and the way I'll scratch dirt will be a caution to the biggest yaller dorg in the country!"

Then the boy galloped over to the door of the cellar room in which he had been placed, and after a great deal of trouble succeeded in getting the key out of the lock. The fact that the key so obstinately refused to come out was the reason why Willy's jailer had not removed it. He had tried, but as the key stuck, he had muttered that "it didn't make any difference, anyway; it might as well stay in, and then I sha'n't have the trouble of totting it around."

The boy persevered, though, and succeeded in getting the key out, but was annoyed to find that he had only his labor for his pains. The key was "a mile too big" as he expressed it, and wouldn't go in the keyhole at all of Frankie's prison door.

The imprisoned girl, who was anxiously awaiting the result of the trial, saw that the key would not fit fully as soon as the boy.

"You must try some other means!" she exclaimed, "and for Heaven's sake! do not delay. I tremble with apprehension, for I think I can hear some one moving overhead. I am certain I hear footsteps, and it may be possible that some one is coming down here."

"By gum! I ain't a-going to be cotched like a rat in a trap, I tell you now!" the boy cried. "If anybody comes down here I will lay 'em out if I can find anything to lay 'em out with in this pesky hole!"

Then, by the aid of his lantern, he made a hasty examination of the cellar, and in one corner he was lucky enough to find a good, stout stick, about an inch and a half in diameter, as handy a weapon for a bout at close quarters as any man could desire.

"Now, if I don't knock him out inside of four rounds, then I'm a big-mouthed catfish, and ain't got no sand!" Willy announced, exultantly, as he swung the club in the air.

The girl knocked on her door to attract his attention, and Willy hurried to the spot.

"What is it?" he asked, bending his ear to the keyhole.

"There is some one walking toward the stairs. The footfalls are heavy, and I feel sure some one is coming down."

"I'm ready for him, if he is as big as a house!" Willy exclaimed, grasping his club, "and if I don't knock him into a cocked hat or into the middle of next week, then I'm a duffer who don't 'pan out' worth a cent."

Willy looked around for a hiding-place. The only place of concealment in the cellar, big enough for a rat to hide in, was under the stairs, down which heavy footsteps had begun to descend.

Soon snuggled under the stairway, the boy turned the light of the lantern down as low as possible, grasped the club firmly and waited for events to develop themselves.

The new-comer descended the stairs, and when he turned into the cellar, by the light of the lantern which he carried in his hand, Willy saw that it was the same man who had decoyed him into the house.

Never having seen him before the time of the interview on the steps, it was not strange that Willy did not know him, and it was mysterious, so the boy thought, that the fellow had recognized him so readily.

The reader will understand why this was so when we say that the ruffian was the hanger-on to the Dudley mansion—Johnny Smirk, the Terrier, who on a certain occasion, which the reader will remember, had tracked the messenger-boy to the telegraph office and there had made diligent inquiries in regard to him.

Under these circumstances no wonder the Terrier, who had the tenacious memory of the animal whose name he bore, should have recognized the lad the instant he set eyes upon him, notwithstanding the completeness of his disguise.

The Terrier was muttering to himself as he turned into the cellar.

"My mind ain't easy," he said. "I ought not to have left the light in with that young imp and I ought not to have let the key stay in the lock. Tain't safe with such a young devil-skin, and the captain would kick up a blue blaze of a row if the street vagabone got loose. If I had my way I would settle him for good, and all with a crack over the head and

then throw his body down the trap into the sewer for the rats to feed on. That's the way I would fix him, the young imp!"

As the ruffian gave voice to these decidedly strong opinions, Willy grasped his club and prayed for the strength of a giant that he might avenge himself upon the rascal with a single good blow.

The Terrier, never dreaming that retribution lurked so near, went directly to the door of the cellar where the boy had been confined and placed his hand upon the lock to take out the key, and was greatly astonished when he discovered that it wasn't there.

"Well, blame me!" he muttered, staring at the door in amazement, "what in Satan's name has become of the key? I am sure I didn't take it out, because I remember distinctly that it kinder stuck, and I thought it might as well stay in. What does it mean? Has that young imp been up to some of his tricks already? I'll soon find out!"

Then, stooping, he brought his eye on a level with the keyhole so as to look into the room.

This was Willy's opportunity; creeping up behind the man as softly as a cat, with all his strength he brought the heavy club down upon the unprotected head of the Terrier, felling him to the ground, stunned by the terrific stroke.

CHAPTER XXIV.

DOWN AMONG THE DEAD MEN.

WILLY had been better than his word, and had "knocked out" his foe in the first round.

"All down but nine! Set 'em up again!" yelled the boy in delight, executing a war-dance around the prostrate form; but not much time did he waste in this amusement, for he understood that the blow had only produced temporary insensibility.

"What, has got to be done, has got to be did quickly, me noble dook!" spouted the boy, stripping off his ragged coat and tearing the cloth into strips, with which he securely tied the insensible Terrier's arms and legs until he was as helpless as a turkey trussed for roasting.

This job performed, he proceeded to "go through" the pockets of the helpless man with the skill and expedition of a practiced pick-pocket.

No valuables of any account rewarded the search, but an ugly-looking clasp knife with a blade six inches long, and a "bull dog" revolver, fully loaded and ready for action, were seized upon by the messenger-boy as lawful prizes.

But the main thing he was after—the key to the door of the apartment where the telegraph girl was confined—eluded his search.

After the search was finished, by main strength Willy dragged the fellow up to the wall and propped him up in the corner.

By this time the Terrier's senses had begun to come back to him.

The two lanterns illuminated the cellar so that when the ruffian opened his eyes and looked around he had plenty of light by which to see how matters stood.

First his gaze fell upon the boy, who stood before him in an attitude of triumph, the knife in one hand and the revolver in the other, the hammer drawn back, ready for action.

A bitter oath broke from the ruffian's lips, and he made a movement as if to rise, but the bonds which confined his limbs prevented this, and in utter astonishment he looked upon the many strips of cloth which Willy had wound around his wrists and ankles.

Then he realized what had occurred; he had been attacked by the boy and vanquished in single fight!

With a mighty effort he essayed to burst the bonds that bound him.

Willy was on the watch, though, and immediately warned him.

"Come! come! none of that, you know, or I'll be obliged to shoot you so full of holes that all you will be fit for is a fish net!" he cried, leveling the revolver directly at the breast of the ruffian.

And, as the Terrier fancied the boy would be as good as his word, he gave up the attempt.

"See hyer, what the blazes do you mean by this, anyway?" he growled.

"Only returning the compliments of the evening," replied Willy, with a provoking smile on his dirt-begrimed face. "You were kind enough to invite me to walk into your parlor, me noble dook, and now I am trying to get square with you. You shut me up in a dungeon cell and I've tied you like a calf going to market; so I reckon we are quits; if anything I am a leetle ahead, and that is the way I always like to leave the game!"

"I tell you, my bold little man, you will be made to pay dear for this bit of fun!" the Terrier growled.

"You'll excuse me, I know, if I doubt that," responded Willy, "but you see I haven't sufficient confidence in your word to believe you. One of these days, when we get better acquainted, mebbe, I will be able to take it in, but I can't do it now."

"You ain't out of this place, yet!" warned the ruffian, a world of menace in his tone.

"But I will be, pretty soon, and what can you do to hinder it, I should like to know?"

"There's a gang up-stairs that will make mince-meat out of you."

"I don't believe it; I don't believe there's a soul in the house besides yourself and yours truly."

"You'll find out whether there is or not when you try to get out," the Terrier growled.

"You can bet all your stamps on that! But now we've done enough chinning, and we must get down to solid business. I will trouble you for that key, if you please."

"Wot key?"

"The key of that door there," and Willy pointed to the apartment where the telegraph girl was confined.

"I don't know anything 'bout any key." Did the boy know that the girl was imprisoned in that room? he wondered.

"Oh, you know where it is, and if you don't want to be made a cold corpus, you had better hand it over."

"You kin search me if you like," growled the ruffian, with an injured air.

"I've been through you, and that's where I got these little playthings," and Willy flourished the pistol and knife.

"Well, then, you ought to know that I am giving it to you straight when I say I ain't got it."

"But you know where it is."

"Nary time! Sides, what do you want of the key of that door? You cannot get out that way; you have got to go up the stairs."

"You teach your grandmother to suck eggs!" Willy replied contemptuously. "I say, tell me where the key is, or I'll blow the whole top of your head off!"

"Oh, I reckon you won't! I guess you ain't so anxious to run your head into a rope as all that; and, as for the key, let me see you get it!" and the Terrier laughed in defiance.

Willy comprehended that, as far as the key was concerned, he was "stuck;" he didn't dare to proceed to extremities with the ruffian, and the fellow knew it.

"Spades will have to come to the front again," the boy muttered; and then a little contrivance attached to the knife-handle at the back of the blade attracted his attention. "Well, hang me if here ain't a screw-driver. I reckon I won't just take off the catch of that lock in no time or nothing! Ho, ho!" and he cried aloud in glee, while the Terrier gave vent to his rage in curses.

"You mustn't swear," remarked Willy, as he set to work at Tick Tick's door: "it's very wicked to swear, and besides you won't catch no fish; nobody does that swears."

Both lock and catch were merely screwed to the outside of the door, and it was not a difficult task to remove the big screws of the catch.

"Oh, you infernal little vagabond!" exclaimed the ruffian. "You will be murdered for this one of these days!"

"What for?" demanded Willy, working away as brisk as a bee; "for opening the door of a cellar where there ain't nobody or nothing in it?"

The girl within, by dint of listening at the keyhole, had managed to comprehend all that had taken place, and she encouraged the boy in his toil.

"Do not delay, Willy," she said; "lose no time, for there is no telling how soon some of the confederates of this ruffian may make their appearance."

"I am doing my level best, Frankie," he replied, "but these screws are awful tough customers to get out, for they are fearfully rusty."

The perseverance of the boy triumphed at last, though; the screws being removed the catch swung loose, the door opened, and the girl made her appearance, very little the worse for her imprisonment.

"Hey presto! Highecockoleum Jig, appear!" the boy shouted, after the style of a magician, as the telegraph girl came into view.

"I pity you, you young whelp, when the captain gets after you for your share in this night's work!" the ruffian exclaimed, fiercely.

"And I pity the chap you call the captain when I get after him for what he has done to-night," replied Willy, boastfully. "He's my mutton, bet yer life!"

"Do not tarry to bandy words with this wretch, but let us haste away at once!" the girl interposed, beseechingly.

"Say, you can't get out of here!" the Terrier exclaimed.

"On, can't we? And why not?" Willy inquired.

"You'll be stopped the minute you reach the landing above."

"Can it be possible?" and the girl's face betrayed her keen fears.

"Nary time!" cried the boy, emphatically.

"Can't you see with half an eye that the dirty galoot is lying? Why, he couldn't tell the truth if he wanted to, to save his life. He's been swapping lies so long that if he tried to tell

the truth the words would stick in his throat and choke him."

"I'll get a chance to choke you, one of these days!"

"You'll have to spell able first!" retorted the boy. "Don't you be worried, Frankie; there isn't another villain in the house but himself. Do you s'pose that if there were any more fellows of his kidney up-stairs he wouldn't have howled for them like blue murder long ago? He's all alone, and he's trying to bluff us."

"You'll never get up those stairs alive!" cried the Terrier.

"Oh, go whistle it! Come along, Frankie!"

The two ran toward the stairway, but, as they pulled open the door which guarded it, the very earth beneath their feet seemed to open, and with wild cries the pair sunk out of sight.

"Down, down among the dead men!" shouted the ruffian.

CHAPTER XXV.

UNDERGROUND.

THE trap into which the fugitives had fallen was most ingeniously arranged, and it was the knowledge that the moment they attempted to open the door the snare would be sprung that prompted the words of the bound and helpless ruffian.

Right at the foot of the stairs was a cistern that, in the old Knickerbocker days, had been used to supply the inhabitants of the house with water, and when, in after years, the gang of lawless men, of whom Almon Dudley was the master-spirit, came in possession of the old domicile, and discovered the existence of the old cistern, finding it two-thirds full of water, they at once hit upon the idea of using it to conceal some of the horrid secrets of their infamous trade, and also utilized it as a defense against being surprised when conducting their deliberations in the recesses of the cellar.

A double trap-door was constructed over the cistern, opening in the center and falling inside the wall instead of lifting up after the fashion of trap-doors generally.

When the doors were up two stout bolts held them in place, so that it was possible to walk over them without danger of plunging into the pit below, but the door which guarded the stairway was so arranged, in connection with the bolts that sustained the trap-doors, that, unless it was opened in a certain way, it shot back the bolts, and whoever was standing upon the cover of the cistern would surely be precipitated into the tank.

With a feeling of exultation, then, the Terrier beheld the two who had succeeded in turning the tables upon him so nicely, rush blindly to certain immolation—perhaps death.

Down they went, and back to its place, with a sharp click, sprung the trap, ready set again for another victim.

The Terrier chuckled hoarsely.

"The captain didn't tell me that I was to kill 'em, but I reckon he won't be sorry when he hears that they have dropped into kingdom come!" he muttered. "I couldn't save 'em, anyway, even if I wanted to, for that young imp of mischief has tied me up so tight I can't move hand or foot, and if I was free, without a ladder or a rope to help 'em climb up, there ain't anybody who could save 'em; the sides are as straight as a string and as slippery as glass. Anyhow, by this time they are as good as gone, 'cos there's six or eight feet of water in the hole."

The Terrier listened, thinking perhaps he might be able to hear the dying groans of the victims strangling in the dark and slimy waters, but the heavy trap was so carefully adjusted as to cut off all sounds.

"Well, whether the captain likes it or not, the job is done, and it ain't my fault. I couldn't help it," the Terrier muttered. "Blow these lashings! I wonder if I could get some sleep in 'em?" The man knew it would be some hours before any of the rest of the gang came in, and that he could not expect to be released until their arrival, so with a view of killing time to his own comfort he stretched himself out as well as he was able and in a short time was sound asleep, despite his bonds.

And for the two who had been precipitated so unceremoniously into that dark grave, what of them?

The merciful Providence which watches over the innocent had indeed come to their aid, for instead of there being six or eight feet of water in the cistern, as was usual, there was only about three, enough to break the fall and immerse them up to their waists. And luckily, too, for the entrapped twain, neither the shock of the fall nor the splashing of the water had extinguished the light in the lantern which the boy carried in his hand.

"Oh, crickey! where on earth are we?" cried Willy, as soon as he could recover his breath.

"In some terrible pit from which I fear there is no escape," replied the girl, disheartened by this dreadful misfortune.

"Never say die, Frankie!" cried the irrepressible. And then he held the lantern up so as to be able to take a survey of the surroundings. "While there's life there's hope, you know. Blowed if we ain't in a cistern!"

"It certainly looks like one," the girl admitted.

"Ain't it lucky there isn't any more water in here? If it had been full we should have been gone coons!"

"Alas! I fear now that we stand a very poor chance of escaping from the peril that threatens us," Frances replied, sadly. "If we are not left to perish in this awful place, it will be because we are rescued by these ruffians from whose hands we were attempting to escape, and then we will be as badly off as ever."

"Mebbe we can get out, some way," encouraged Willy, trying hard to appear confident. "And if we do get out won't we try hard to pay off the rascals who played this trick upon us! Let's see if we can't climb up out of this hole," and then he commenced a close scrutiny of the walls.

"Oh, crickey! see here!" he cried, abruptly. He had turned around, and his gaze was now fixed upon a small cavity in the wall, just at the water's edge.

The mystery of the right of the water in the cistern was now explained. The wall, yielding to the influence of time and the ceaseless pressure of the water, had given way, and through the hole the contents of the pit had escaped down to that point.

"What is it?" asked the telegraph girl, excitedly.

"Look at that hole! That is where the water has gone. If it hadn't been for that we should have passed in our checks long afore this, dead drowned, for sure! and I say, Frankie, if the water went out that way, why can't we?" and Willy's face brightened at the thought.

"Ah, but water can go where we cannot," the girl replied, yet at the same time secretly inspired with hope.

"Yes, but it was a big lot of it, I reckon. Just see how high it was in the cistern," and the boy pointed to the well-defined mark on the wall, which plainly showed where the water in the pit formerly stood. "And, Frankie, when a heap of water like that cavorted, I tell you it must have cut out a pretty big passage," and the boy began a close inspection of the passage by thrusting his lantern into it. The cavity was about two feet in diameter, and ran forward as straight as though constructed by human hands.

"Well?" asked the girl, anxiously, peering over Willy's shoulder.

"It's a good big hole, and goes right ahead as far as I can see."

"It would be possible for us to crawl through it?"

"Oh, yes; play snake; but, I say, Frankie, where do you suppose we would fetch out? Mebbe, you know, it gets smaller and smaller, and we might get stuck."

"There are sewers under all the streets in the city, I believe."

"Oh, yes; I have seen the men working in them."

"Water will seek its level, you know, and I think the chances are good that this passage leads to the nearest sewer."

"If it does, and we can get to it, we are all right, 'cos we could get out of the sewer easy enough at the first corner. It's a big covered drain, I can tell you, for I've often looked into 'em when the men was cleanin' 'em out at the man-holes. After a big rain shower I have often watched the water tumbling down through the openings, and thought I would like to go down with it, and see what kind of a place it was; and I have heard, too, Frankie, that folks who go down in the sewers often find jewelry and money that has been lost."

"We are lost now, and we will be lucky if we can find ourselves," the girl remarked.

"That's so, like two babes in the woods, and without any robins to cover us up with leaves."

"Go ahead, Willy, and we will pray that since a merciful Providence has saved us from the dangers that threatened us so far, it will not desert us at the last extremity."

In the hole then crawled the boy on hands and knees, holding the lantern so that its rays would fall ahead of him. The girl followed.

On they went for some ten feet, and then the narrow passage suddenly widened into quite a spacious apartment, evidently a very old and extremely deep cellar.

The escaping water had cut a passage from the cistern into the cellar, and then had been absorbed by the porous ground.

In this cellar the two stood erect, sorry-looking sights after their dirty crawl, being covered with dirt from head to foot.

They had not bettered their position much, for as they looked around, they could not discover any signs of either door or window to the place; there seemed no way of either getting into or out of this underground room.

"Well, if we ain't in a fix!" the boy declared, lugubriously.

CHAPTER XXVI.

MARTIN EXPLAINS.

AFTER the usual fashion, Esther had been questioned regarding her name, age, nationality, condition in life, and whether she had a

trade or not, upon arriving at the prison, and when it was found that sewing was the only occupation of which she professed a knowledge, she was assigned a task in binding shoes.

The girl had excited quite a deal of interest among the officials of the prison with whom she came in contact. She was so beautiful, so lady-like, so resigned to her fate, accepting it with cold composure, giving way to neither tears nor lamentation, so utterly unlike the common run of female convicts, that it was no wonder even the stern guardians of the gloomy abode should become interested in the new convict.

And, like nearly all who had become acquainted with the particulars of the case, they were puzzled. Was she an innocent victim, unjustly convicted, and sustained by the hope that in time the truth would come to light, and justice would be done her? or was she a hardened criminal, an old hand at the business, who had played for a heavy stake, lost the game, and now was content to pay the penalty, "game" enough not to betray her accomplices?

Assaid—when Esther had been conducted to the ward to which she had been assigned, she was much astonished to find the keeper in charge to be her old acquaintance, Martin Walaker, the late foreman of the bindery.

The departure of the guard left them free to converse.

"I little thought to find you here!" Esther exclaimed, impulsively, extending her hand, while, for the first time, tears crept into her brilliant eyes.

He clasped the offered hand earnestly, a mournful smile upon his honest face.

"Ah, Miss Leigh, when I first made your acquaintance if any one had predicted that we should ever meet under such circumstances as now surround us, I would have regarded the speaker more as a lunatic than a prophet."

"Who can tell what will happen in this life? The revolution of Fortune's wheel can never be guarded against, and the most unlikely events occur. When I was accused of this contemptible crime it would not have required much of a prophet to predict that I would be convicted, so complete was the terrible web in which I was ensnared, but it would have been a shrewd guesser indeed who could have foretold that you would become an official in such a place as this. I was not a free agent; I came here because I could not help myself; the chains of destiny were around me, and I was forced onward despite myself; but you—you was not obliged to come."

"Oh, yes, I was," he replied, with a quiet smile. "I couldn't help myself any more than you."

Again the tears rose in the lustrous eyes, and Esther's lips trembled. With the quick instincts of womankind she had penetrated his motives, and she was touched even more than she would have cared to acknowledge by the chivalrous act.

"Oh, Mr. Walaker, you have willingly shut yourself up in this gloomy prison, so as to be able to make my unhappy lot a little more pleasant," she cried, in an outburst of feeling.

"Well, I suppose I may as well own that your guess is correct, since you have hit upon the truth."

"And I have wronged you so cruelly!" she added, mournfully.

"You have wronged me? I don't understand how that can be. I was not conscious of it; explain, please?" he answered, surprised at the acknowledgment.

"Of course you do not understand; it is not possible that you should; but I have done you great injustice. I know we did not part on very friendly terms; there was a coldness between us; but that was my fault. The advice you gave me in regard to a certain gentleman,"—and a slight flush appeared upon her face as she referred to Dudley—"was not palatable to me. No doubt you meant it for the best, and I was wrong to allow myself to receive it in the manner that I did. I ought to have thanked you for your kindness instead of being so ungenerous as to become offended."

"Miss Esther, we all make mistakes sometimes; I made one myself in regard to this matter, for if I had known how deeply you were interested in the man I should not have spoken to you about him so bluntly."

"You acted for the best, and all I regret is that I did not receive it in the proper spirit; and now I humbly beg your pardon for my willfulness."

"And is that what you call wronging me?"

"Oh, no, that isn't all. I will explain. You never came to see me while I was waiting my trial, although you had once told me that you would be glad of a chance to serve me; and in the court-room, although I looked for you, I could not discover you amid the spectators. I believed you were angry with me and so kept away."

"I was in the court, but remained in the background, for I could not bear that you should know I saw you in such a condition. I did not visit you in the prison, for, from the way in which we parted, I feared you would not like it. I could not be of any assistance

CHAPTER XXVII.

A REVELATION.

and so I kept away, but at the same time I was fully as eager to serve you as any one; and when I saw that there was no doubt of your conviction I made up my mind to come to Sing Sing, too. Luckily, I had influence in a certain quarter, so the matter was easily arranged, and through that same influence I had you placed in my ward, that I could look out for you and in a measure make your life a little happier."

"Mr. Walaker, you have a noble heart. Few men would voluntarily tear themselves from all the pleasures of life and shut themselves up in a prison for the sake of serving a foolish girl who was not wise enough to know her friends from her enemies."

"Esther, if you will promise not to be angry with me I will explain the reasons that actuate me."

"You have proved yourself to be a true friend, and I should be very ungrateful indeed to be angry with you, no matter what you say," she replied, slowly and with evident confusion, for she had an idea of the nature of the disclosure he was about to make.

"When I spoke to you in regard to Mr. Dudley you were angry with me, and I can hardly blame you. You looked upon me as one who was disposed to asperse a successful rival, but, as Heaven is my judge, no such unworthy thought was in my mind. If I had believed the man to be deserving of the love of such a girl as you, no matter if the passion in my heart for you had been ten times as great as it is, I would not have breathed a word to his discredit. But, as far as I could discover, there seemed to be a cloud hanging over him; no one seemed to know aught of him, and therefore I felt that it was my duty to speak. His behavior, too, during the trial appeared strange to me. Of course, Esther, I will own that I watched him with a jealous, but not a prejudiced eye. He seemed to shrink from appearing prominently in the case, and kept as much in the background as possible."

"Oh, Mr. Walaker, I have the most perfect faith in that gentleman. Please don't say anything to make me doubt," the girl replied, a mournful ring in her voice. "I have gone through so much already and yet have not given way to despair, but if I lose my respect and faith in the man who is to me above all other men what is to become of me?"

The young man was touched by this plaintive appeal.

"I will not say another word in regard to the matter, Esther, and I am really sorry I have said as much as I have, for I would do anything in the world to spare you pain. We will say no more upon this topic, but leave it to the revolutions and revelations of time; whether he is all that your womanly faith believes, or what my manly suspicions surmise, we shall know some day. If he is noble and true, time will show it beyond a doubt, and if he is a villain hiding behind a false face, the mask must drop sooner or later. For the present, all we can do is to make the best of the dreadful position in which you are placed. Luckily I am so situated as to be able to make your lot a little less unpleasant than if you were in charge of a stranger: for in such places as this, where the worst criminal declares he has been unjustly convicted, it is not strange that the keepers grow hardened and come at last to disbelieve all tales told by prisoners, never reflecting, though, that one out of a hundred may be innocent of all wrong doing and most unjustly incarcerated."

"And, Mr. Walaker, you have voluntarily shut yourself up within these cold and cruel walls just so that you would be able to be of assistance to me, the foolish, heedless girl who was angry with you because you were brave and generous enough to step out of your way and give her a word of caution when you thought she was going wrong! Oh, sir, you have made me so deeply your debtor that I fear I never shall be able to extinguish the obligation."

There was so much pathos in the tone in which she spoke that it deeply affected the young man.

There was only one way by which such devotion could be requited; both of them were conscious of it, and conscious, too, that as matters were at present it could not be.

"Oh, why is it that I love the other, and not this noble, generous fellow?" thought Esther.

"Well, well, you mustn't let that trouble you," he remarked, assuming a cheerful tone which he was far from feeling.

"Stone walls do not a prison make
Nor iron bars a cage."

That is what the poet declares, you know, and that is the way you must look at it. You are innocent; you have no right to be here; ergo, you are not in prison, and you only stay here a certain time to suit your own convenience. That solves the matter, and sweeps iron bars and stone walls away at a breath.

After a few more words, Esther was placed in charge of the matron, who proceeded to instruct her in regard to her work. And now, since she had seen the generous young man the prison did not seem to be such a living tomb as it had at first appeared.

THE hours fly past just as surely to the unfortunate souls who linger in "durance vile," as to those who enjoy the blessed gift of liberty, more slowly, perhaps, yet the longest day will come to its end; so day melted into day, week into week, until a month was compassed since Esther's arrival at the prison.

Apart from the fact that she was a prisoner, and not free to go whither she listed, the position of the girl was not an unpleasant one.

Walaker, in his official situation, was able to favor her greatly, and the matron, in whose immediate charge she was, seemed to take her cue from the young man, and treated the girl with all possible kindness.

The matron was a hard-faced, middle-aged woman, with rather a repelling manner, and a brisk, sharp way with her; Mrs. Chirchester she was called, and from the first she appeared anxious to make the girl understand that she was friendly-disposed toward her.

Esther believed this was due to Mr. Walaker's interference, and yet at times she fancied the matron did not seem to admire the young man. And then, too, Mrs. Chirchester had a peculiar way of looking at her at odd moments when she was in the neighborhood, which greatly perplexed the fair prisoner; and finally Esther fancied that the woman wished to speak to her upon some subject, yet hesitated to do so.

Just one month from the time the bindery girl had become an inmate of the prison, the matron unbosomed herself.

The day's toil was over, and Esther was in her narrow cell, meditating upon the strange events which had befallen her since she had plunged into the whirling life of the great metropolis, when the matron entered, apparently for the purpose of seeing if everything was all right for the night, but in reality to have a few words with the girl.

"Well, Esther, you are all right, I see," remarked the woman, pretending to examine the cell.

"Yes, ma'am."

"How do you sleep now? Have you become reconciled to these narrow quarters?"

"I have become used to them, but I am afraid I cannot truthfully say I am reconciled," Esther replied with a sad smile, looking around her.

"And you have been here a month?"

"Yes, a month to-day."

"I suppose it seems to you like a year?"

"The time has seemed terribly long."

"You were sentenced for three years, wasn't you?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Well, how was it? I didn't hear all the particulars of your trial. It was check-raising, I believe?"

"Yes, so it was charged."

"And they had you dead to rights," the woman remarked, with rather a coarse little laugh.

Now, although Esther was not much used to slang expressions, yet she understood what the woman meant.

"The proof against me seemed overwhelming. I do not wonder, when I look back and reflect upon the matter, that every one thought I was guilty."

Again the matron laughed—a low chuckle, with a great deal of meaning in it, yet Esther could not understand why she should so express herself.

"Well, my dear, ever since I knew anything about the case, it has been a wonder to me you arranged the job so badly," the woman observed.

"Why, it was a regular bungle; a new beginner could have done better."

"I do not understand you," Esther said, puzzled to comprehend the woman's meaning.

"That's right; keep the game up. I don't blame you for not trusting me. That is the right way to get on—the right way to get through the world; don't trust anybody any more than you can help. You've got a splendid face, too, for it's just as innocent as a baby's. It was a wonder that you didn't succeed in pulling through. Didn't you have a good lawyer?"

"Oh, yes, a very excellent one—so everybody said."

"The captain didn't plan the operation as skillfully as he generally does, or else you wouldn't have been tripped up so easily."

"The captain?" Esther asked, not understanding to whom the woman referred.

"Yes; you know who I mean."

"Indeed I do not."

"Bah! why do you want to try to humbug me?" the matron exclaimed, roughly. "I know all about it. I've been crooked myself at one time, although I am acting on the square now. You can trust me. I have been 'seen' by your friends, and I am going to do all I can for you."

"I am very glad of it," Esther replied.

"But you ought to trust me."

"Oh, I do, ma'am."

The woman gave a sort of scornful sniff.

"Well, I don't know; you have got a queer way of showing it. Why don't you make a clean breast and confide in me?"

"But I do not understand what I am to confide," Esther replied, in bewilderment.

"Oh, you are a terribly innocent thing," the matron remarked, with a sneer. "Well, I suppose you know your own game best. One thing is sure; you have succeeded in pulling the wool over the eyes of this new assistant warden, for he thinks you are just a darling!"

A faint blush, like unto the pink tinge that crimsoned the pearly sea shell, crept up into the conscious face of the girl.

"Yes, yes; you have taken him for all he is worth, and it's quite a feather in your cap, too, for, though he is a greenhorn, and not used to the ways of the crooked people of this world, yet he's no fool, and I don't believe there is more than one woman in ten thousand who could pull the wool over his eyes."

Esther's heart sunk within her, for, despite the unfamiliar and ambiguous words which interlarded the matron's speech, she understood that the woman believed in her guilt. And more, the woman evidently regarded her as an old and experienced criminal.

Esther had been encouraged by the idea that the matron's friendliness proceeded from a belief in her innocence; so it was a shock to discover that this impression was wholly an error.

"Yes, yes, my dear, you are very well situated," the woman continued, "and I am glad you succeeded in making a friend of the keeper, for if he was inclined to be ugly you would have a hard time of it. So, take my advice and keep it up; keep on in your cunning, innocent way, and play him for all he is worth."

Esther, ashamed that any one should think her so vile a thing, hastened to set the woman right.

"Mr. Walaker knows I am innocent, and that is the reason why he tries to make my position as pleasant as possible."

"Of course; ha, ha, ha!" and the woman laughed coarsely, and yet with a subdued utterance, as though afraid of being overheard. "Oh, you are at the very top of the heap, my dear! You are a jewel and no mistake, and I don't wonder the captain prizes you as the apple of his eye!"

Esther was mystified; the woman before had referred to the "captain," and in a familiar way, as though she felt sure the prisoner knew all about him; but the poor victim did not understand it at all.

"I do not comprehend who you mean?" she said.

"Ah, you're a sly puss! but you are only wasting time in attempting to hoodwink me," the woman replied. "You may fool the keeper all right, but I've got the 'office,' my dear, and I know all about you. Didn't the captain warn you that I was going to be your pal and do all I can for you?"

Esther shook her head; she was bewildered by these strange words.

"I guess you are a little green about such places as this. Have you ever done time in quod before?"

"I don't know what you mean."

"Well, you are either much more of a greenhorn than I thought, or else you are trying to make a fool of me." And the matron appeared annoyed.

"Oh, indeed I am not; I do not really understand your strange expressions."

"Quod is prison, and doing time means serving out a sentence, but I reckon you never got nabbed before."

"I never was in a jail in my life."

"You've been lucky, but you will get used to it in time, for the smartest bird gets trapped once in a while. You're well-fixed here, though, for you have got on the right side of the warden and the gang have squared me. You see, my chick, money is just as powerful inside of Sing Sing Prison as it is outside. Money will do almost anything in the outside world, and it will do almost anything here. If a convict has plenty of money there ain't any difficulty about his getting along right comfortably, and even if he comes here as innocent as a baby and don't know the ropes, there's plenty to post him if he is only willing to come down with the mopuses. Money makes the mare go in Sing Sing as well as anywhere else. But your gang are on a big lay. They ain't satisfied to have you get along here, nice and comfortable; nothing will do the captain but to get you out altogether."

"Get me out—procure me a pardon?" exclaimed Esther, trembling with excitement.

"Oh, what a deep one you are! Oh, yes; a pardon, and I am to play governor and sign it, ho, ho, ho!"

"But, how is that? I do not understand; has Mr. Walaker aught to do with it?"

"No, no!" cried the matron in alarm; "not a word to him or all the fish will be in the fire. He's on the square, but the captain will explain all to you. He'll be up to-morrow and you tell him that it will be all right as far as I am concerned." And with this assurance the woman departed, leaving Esther much amazed.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

IMPORTANT NEWS.

The more Esther reflected upon the particulars of her interview with the matron, the greater became her bewilderment, and a vague feeling of uneasiness began to take possession of her. But for the matron's positive injunction she would have confided all to Mr. Walaker, but she was too honorable to disobey the injunction of secrecy.

And "the captain," whom Mrs. Chirchester spoke about in such a familiar manner, was coming on the morrow—was it possible that it was Dudley? It might be so. He had not visited her since she had been imprisoned, but she had received three letters from him, couched in a guarded manner, bidding her be of good cheer, and not to give way to despair, and saying, too, that he would visit her as soon as possible. But, if it was Dudley whom the matron meant, it seemed strange that she should call him so familiarly "the captain." Captain of what?

The innocent victim felt like one walking in a maze; she was bewildered and knew not how it would all end.

That evening when Walaker made his nightly rounds, he took occasion to stop and have a few minutes' chat with Esther.

"Do you know, I don't think you had fair play on your trial?" he remarked. "My uncle and the judge were on intimate terms, and I have an idea that, in your instance, the scales of justice were not controlled by an impartial hand. My uncle persecuted you; there isn't any use mincing the matter, and the truth might as well be spoken. I knew he designed to make you his prey; and we had hot words together on the very day the check was given you. The evidence he gave on your trial—that it was his custom on the final week of any of his employees to pay the wages by check—did not apply to you, for he had no idea it was your final week. He had not given you any notification that your services were no longer desired."

"No, sir."

"Nor had he notified me, whose place it was, as foreman of the bindery, to give out all such notices. You may depend upon it, Esther, you would not have had trouble if he had found you willing to comply with his wishes. I am satisfied you are the victim of a deep-laid plot; I had a suspicion in regard to this from the very first, but I hesitated to believe a relative of mine could be such a thorough-paced rascal. Within the last two or three weeks, though, certain things have come to my knowledge which make me feel perfectly sure my impression is a correct one. You are the victim of a cunningly-concocted plot. My uncle when he found you were not inclined to look with a favorable eye upon his schemes, coolly and deliberately determined to ruin your character in the eyes of all the world, his idea being to be able to control your fate, so that he could say, 'It is either yield to my wishes, or else go to State Prison.'"

"And he tried to show me how foolish I was, and each time I drove him from me with scorn and flashing eyes," Esther exclaimed, her brilliant eyes flashing.

"He knew I suspected that in some way he had had a hand in this matter, and while I was in the city he acted very cautiously, and was at all times upon his guard, but my departure set his mind at rest. At this, however, he reckoned 'without the host,' for when I suspended my watch, a couple of the shrewdest detectives in the country took it up, and the result has been that Mr. John Jefferson Walaker has been shadowed day and night, and the work has been performed so cleverly, too, that he has never suspected that he was watched. Believing that, owing to my absence, he was safe from espionage, he has become somewhat careless, and in consequence my men have secured some important information. If you remember, one of the strongest witnesses against you was the treasurer, William Sneed."

"Yes, I remember, and he seemed to feel truly sorry for my unfortunate position."

"Very true; and the testimony he gave came out very reluctantly, just as if he wished to screen you all he could."

"And I felt grateful to him for his kindness, for he was almost a stranger to me."

"Sneed was a man whom I esteemed highly. I have known him ever since he entered the bindery, then a mere lad. He was rather a straight-laced youth, greatly given to study, and never indulging in the amusements common to young men; somewhat inclined to be religious, too, with a tendency to bring that fact forward rather more prominently than is usual with young men of his age. In fine, Sneed was looked upon as a model young man, and was held up as an example to all the rest in the establishment. Being such a paragon, of course I did not believe he could be induced to do anything out of the way. I could understand how a trap could be laid for you if he was a party to it, but without his assistance I did not see how it could possibly be managed. Well, the detectives have discovered some remarkable facts concerning Mr. William Sneed. Instead of being a model young man, devoted to his duties and his home, they found that his character was one which would not bear inspection. In brief, our model clerk is a hypocrite of the deepest dye, addicted to all sorts of little, low vices, and living at a rate far beyond his income. One of my men took special pains to get on intimate terms with him, and one night after he had been drinking freely, in a moment of confidence he informed the detective, who was playing the role of a jolly good fellow, that he was 'all right'—he could afford to spend money, for he had a ring in old Walaker's nose, and if the boss didn't come up with the money, he would make it lively for him. This boast of course set my man on the scent immediately, but he was not able to secure any more information. Little as it is, however, it gives me a clew. As I suspected my uncle from the beginning, I was not surprised when my detectives asserted that they believed your arrest and imprisonment were due to a plot arranged between my uncle and his cashier, although at first I could hardly credit that my uncle, whom I knew to be the most careful and cautious of men, should be rash and imprudent enough to place himself in the power of any such petty and common rascal as Sneed, and give him a chance to bleed him. But, in his insane desire to get you into his power, it

is evident he has forgotten his usual caution. One of the detectives came up to see me this afternoon, and from him I learned these particulars. So be of good cheer, for at last I think I see a way to make your innocence manifest. The detectives and myself have contrived a cunning trap in which we have great hopes of catching the chief villain, and if we succeed in catching him on the hip, then your release will speedily follow."

"Mr. Walaker, I can only pay you with thanks for all your kindness," Esther replied, visibly affected by this proof of the young man's devotion to her interests.

"Oh, that is all right; you must look upon me in the light of a brother—one who is bound by the tie of blood to do everything in his power; and we are all brothers and sisters in a human sense, you know. I thought I would stop in and tell you how we were progressing, and that at last we had got hold of something more tangible to go upon than mere suspicion. I fancied the good news might make you sleep the lighter to-night."

The fair prisoner smiled, but there were tears in her eyes; this consideration for her welfare touched her too deeply for mere words to express.

She could not help comparing his conduct with that of the man to whom she had given her young affections.

Contrary to Walaker's expectations, her slumbers that night were far more uneasy than usual; a presentiment of coming danger seemed to fill her soul; vague and undefined apprehensions possessed her; strange dreams haunted her pillow; but when she awoke in the morning she could not remember anything connected with them, except that they oppressed her with a feeling of terror. In fact, a more unpleasant night the girl did not remember to have ever passed.

During the morning, while she was occupied with her work, the matron, under pretense of examining what she was doing, improved the opportunity to convey a bit of information to her.

"I was correct in what I said yesterday," she remarked. "He is coming this afternoon, sure, and you can depend upon it that if any man can work the oracle he's the boy! I tell you, if the captain can't do the trick then no man can!"

Hereupon the girl determined to put the question which was in her mind.

"I do not understand who it is that you mean," she remarked. "I do not know any gentleman who bears the title of captain."

"Well, you are the most innocent appearing duck that I ever ran across! But, I say, why do you try to pull the wool over my eyes? Haven't I let the cat out of the bag? Don't you understand that I am bought and paid for, and I am not the only one, either, or else the captain wouldn't be able to have a private talk with you in your cell, as he will have this afternoon. You see, my darling, money is as good within the walls of the stone jug as it is out, as I told you—that men and women can be bought in Sing Sing just as well as anywhere else. The wires are all laid, and when the captain gets ready to pull them you will fly out of this hole like a bird. Your man is a trump, no matter what name he goes under!"

Then the matron passed on, leaving Esther more than ever bewildered.

CHAPTER XXIX.

WHAT MONEY WILL DO.

It turned out exactly as the matron predicted.

That afternoon Esther was excused from work and told to remain in her cell as a visitor was expected, and about three o'clock the matron escorted Almon Dudley into her presence, and then, with a significant smile, as much as to say, "I told you so," retired.

Dudley was dressed in the height of fashion as usual, although he appeared out of sorts, being pale and careworn.

With outstretched hands he advanced, and Esther, troubled and nervous, trembling under the influence of an emotion which she did not understand, rose to greet him.

First he warmly shook her hands, clasping both of her slender palms within his own, and then, with a caressing motion, he drew her toward him and attempted to fold her to his breast.

At first she submitted, although, pale and anxious, she seemed more like a victim than a loving girl embracing her betrothed, but no sooner did she feel his arms about her than, with a half-shudder, she attempted to withdraw from his embrace.

"No, no; not here! Not in this dreadful place," she murmured, sighing as she glanced at the cold stone walls.

"Ah, this is unkind," Dudley replied, gently retaining her hands. "I am afraid, Esther, that you do not love me as I love you. What difference does it make whether we are in a prison or beneath the tree canopy of heaven? My love is the same in one place as in the other. Just think how long we have been separated! Why, Esther, my darling, it seems an age since I looked upon your dear face. If you only knew how I have looked forward to this meeting—how I have really counted the hours and chided them because they seemed to creep along with leaden-gaited tread! I would have come days—weeks ago, if I could only have arranged it, but it was not possible. I have not been idle. I have been using all my power to get you out of this dreadful place, and now to have you draw yourself away, as though my caresses were distasteful to you, why, Esther, you wound me to the very heart!"

Full of pathos was the voice of the man, and sorrowful the expression upon his face, as he watched the effect of his speech upon the girl.

"It does not seem right to me, in this place," she murmured, trembling with agitation, and clearly much pained by the situation.

"All places are alike to such an absorbing love as mine!" he declared. "It is not possible, Esther, that you have learned to forget me during this short separation; you have not forgotten the vows we exchanged, nor the devotion that we swore to each other?"

The girl's hands shook within the firm grasp of her suitor.

"Oh, no, I have not forgotten anything," she answered, "but this place chills me to the soul; and then remember what I am; think of the crime of which I have been convicted!"

"But I know you are as innocent as a babe!"

"Ah, yes, but the stain is upon me," wearily—"a stain, perhaps, that may never be wiped away."

"You must not give way to these forebodings. You must cheer up and hope for the best. My love for you is just as great now as it has ever been. In fact, I think it is greater, for these clouds of misfortune that encompass you only make me think the more of you."

"I am glad of that," she said. "It is pleasant to know that some one in the world thinks well of me."

Dudley was disappointed; his declaration of his undying love had not produced the effect anticipated. The listless manner of Esther annoyed him; the love-light shone not in her eyes. He had expected that, upon his arrival, she would have fallen upon his breast in a transport of joy, and this seeming indifference both puzzled and annoyed him. He had not realized how the shock had been so heavy that the poor victim went before it like the reed prostrated by the hurricane.

"Thinks well of you?" he repeated. "Ah, Esther, if you could only look into my heart and see the great love which exists for you. What care I that a purblind world has dared to asperse your fair name? The truth will make itself manifest one of these days; then the malignants who now scorn you will only be too glad to do you justice."

"If I do not die before that time," with a deep sigh. Someway—she could not have explained how it was herself—since Dudley's arrival courage and fortitude seemed to have deserted her. His coming, which should have inspired her with new strength, on the contrary depressed her, which Dudley noted, greatly to his chagrin.

"Oh, you must not talk of dying!" he said, encouragingly. "You have years of life and happiness before you. These clouds cannot last, and when they have passed and we bask in the sunlight once more we will look back and laugh to think how downcast were our spirits and how distrustful we were of the future."

"But to remain here three long and weary years!" she murmured.

"Yes, and that is exactly what you shall not do. Do not think for a moment that I will be satisfied to remain quiet while such a wrong is perpetrated."

"But how can you help it?"

"Sit down and I will tell you. Do not think I have been idle while you have been languishing here."

Esther sat down upon the side of the iron bedstead while Dudley helped himself to the stool.

"In the first place, Esther, you know I would not hesitate to spend money as freely as though it was so much water to aid you, and, dearest, money will buy almost everything in this life, even within the walls of a prison. You know there is an old saying that every man has his price, which applies as well to the men who rule in such places as this as elsewhere."

"Yes, so the matron said."

"Ah, she has been talking to you, then?" and a slight uneasiness was perceptible in his manner.

"Yes, she told me I would have a visitor to-day, and although I expected it was you yet I was not sure, for she did not call you by name, but always spoke of you as the 'captain.'"

A slight frown gathered upon Dudley's face, and he hesitated for a moment before he replied. It is cool, adroit and long-headed man of the world, used for years to wearing a mask of lies, actually experienced a feeling of reluctance in regard to deceiving this innocent girl.

"The captain? Ah, yes," he said at last; "that is a title some of my acquaintances sometimes give me; a relic of the war of the rebellion wherein I served. But, what did the matron say?"

"Oh, she was very kind, and tried to cheer me up. She appeared to have the greatest confidence in you, and said, too, just as you stated, that money was as powerful here as anywhere else."

Dudley apparently felt relieved, for his face brightened, and he drew a long breath as though a weight had been taken from his mind.

"She is a good soul, though rather inclined to talk a little too much, sometimes," he remarked. "But she is right about the money. If it had not been for money I should not be able to talk to you in your cell, this day; and, as I told you, Esther, I have paid out the cash freely to serve you. Through my political friends, too, I have approached the Governor, and there isn't much doubt that in time, I will be able to secure your pardon, but that is one of those ticklish jobs which takes time, and is very uncertain. The thing may be accomplished right away, and then it may be six months or a year before it can be arranged. But, while I have been working to get you out of here by fair means I have not neglected the foul."

The girl looked at him with wondering eyes when he made this declaration. He had lowered his voice and spoke in a cautious whisper.

"I knew the effect this confinement would have upon one of your tender nature, and I felt perfectly sure that, if you were not released, you would not be able to live a year in this gloomy prison; so I put myself in communication with certain gentlemen who understand how to pull the wires, and have so arranged the matter that you can walk out of this prison almost any evening you choose."

"But I do not understand," said Esther, mystified by this announcement.

"Why, I have bribed some of the prison officials, so that they will not only wink at but arrange your escape. Of course it has been a deuced costly proceeding, but, what care I for money where you are concerned?"

"Escape! fly from this jail," murmured Esther, trembling with nervous excitement. "Oh, Mr. Dudley, I cannot do that, for by so doing I would proclaim myself a criminal in reality. To fly is a proof of guilt."

And, try as he would, Dudley could not shake the fair girl in this opinion.

"No, I would rather stay here, even though I was certain that death would come before the end of my term!" she declared.

Dudley was baffled, but he put as good a face on the matter as possible.

"Well, we must attack the Governor with renewed vigor for the pardon, then."

But, though he assumed a cheerful aspect he was conscious that a cloud had come between himself

and the girl, but he did not betray this by his bearing and took leave of her in the most cordial manner.

"Why is it I feel this coldness toward this man?" Esther asked herself after he had departed.

CHAPTER XXX. ANOTHER CHECK.

DUDLEY, after this unsatisfactory interview with the young prisoner, returned instantly to the city, and consumed the time of the journey in cursing the evil luck which brought him in contact with such an obstinate piece of humanity.

"I couldn't move her any more than a rock," he muttered, as he sat in a compartment of one of the palace cars, puffing away at his cigar, and endeavoring to form new plans in lieu of those which she had disarranged by her stupid prejudices, as he termed them. "When a woman will, she will, you may depend upon it, and when she won't, she won't, and there's an end on it," he muttered, repeating the time-worn saying. "If she escapes, every one will believe she is guilty, and so, forsooth, she will stay there, even if she dies of a broken heart, pining away her life like the caged wild bird beating against the wires of its prison-house. But, women are so deuced unreasonable; and then, when they take a notion into their heads there is no getting rid of it. I begin to believe Jackson was in the right, after all. A man has very little luck when he depends upon a woman. And, by the by, speaking of women, I wonder how my old-time acquaintance gets along, this telegraph girl who was bold enough to enter the lists against me? By this time I have no doubt she begins to realize that it was no easy job she undertook when she attempted to hunt me down. It is the old joke about the Frenchman in India. It is great good fun to hunt the tiger, but when the tables are reversed, and the tiger hunts you, the sport is not so apparent. In her case the situation was reversed almost immediately, and by this time I have no doubt she heartily regrets ever having tried to measure either wits or strength with me."

And in such meditations as these Dudley occupied his mind until the city was reached.

Jackson was at the depot when the train got in, and to his confidential man of business Dudley briefly related the details of his interview with the imprisoned girl, the two walking onward as they talked toward Dudley's house.

Jackson shook his head; the result of that interview affected him greatly.

"I tell you what it is, captain," he said, "if I were you I would give up this thing altogether. You must see now that, even if you get the girl, you will never be able to bend her to your purpose."

"It doesn't look very much like it," Dudley admitted.

"And with such a stiff-necked, obstinate mate you will be bound to have a deal of trouble."

"Very likely—very likely, indeed," the captain assented, in a contemplative sort of way.

"Well, better let her slide, eh?"

"Jackson, my boy, I have spent some money on this affair."

"Yes, I know that, and if you keep on you will have to spend an awful sight more."

"If I stop I waste all I have put in."

"Better have it that way than to keep on, spend a deal more, and in the end get no satisfaction out of it."

"Ah, but there is where your calculation is at fault. I will get some satisfaction out of it. In the first place, I get the girl, and there will be a deal of gratification in that, for I might as well confess to you I am most decidedly struck by her, and I have made up my mind she shall become my prize if the wit of man can win her; and after I get her, if I do not succeed in bending her to my purpose, why then I will have to do without. A man can't always have everything his own way, you know."

Jackson grunted assent, but it was evident he was illy satisfied.

"By the way, did you hear anything from the Terrier to-day?"

"Not a word."

"The telegraph girl is obstinate, then. I will have to try the effect of a little starvation upon her. Perhaps if she is kept without food for a day or two, she may be inclined to come to terms."

"It won't do any harm to try it."

And, acting upon this idea, at about nine in the evening Dudley and his man started for the old house in Roosevelt street, both disguised in rough clothes to avoid observation; no gentlemen, after nine in the night, would care to be abroad in that locality.

Provided with a duplicate key they entered the old house, but to their astonishment could find no traces of the man whom they sought, and it was one of Dudley's most stringent rules, too, that when a pal was detailed for special service, he must not quit the spot without leaving a note stating whither he was gone, when he expected to return, and, in fact, all particulars.

"What's up?" exclaimed Jackson, his suspicions excited on the instant.

"Well, I don't exactly understand," Dudley replied, perplexed. "I never knew the Terrier to break orders before, even when in liquor."

"That is so; he generally keeps his senses about him, no matter how drunk he gets. I'll bet a hat there has been mischief afoot!" said the alarmed Jackson. "Do you s'pose the girl could fool him in any way?"

"If she has she is smarter than I thought, and the Terrier, in that case, isn't the man I have always taken him to be; but we can decide that point in a few minutes."

They had lighted a lamp upon entering the house, and with it in hand Dudley led the way to the lower regions.

They found the door closed at the foot of the cellar stairs, and being posted in regard to the trap beyond, were careful to open it in such a way that the spring door, through which Tick Tick and the messenger-boy had been hurled, should not be disturbed.

And after they got fairly into the cellar, the first thing which met their eyes was the Terrier, bound and helpless!

"By blazes! I'm glad you've come!" he cried, as the captain and his associate approached.

"What in the fiend's name does this mean?" demanded Dudley, in a rage, the more violent because his quick eyes had noticed that the bolts which had fastened the girl in her prison-house were withdrawn.

"Before I answer any questions, for Heaven's sake cut me loose and give me something to drink. I have been tied up here like a bird ready for roasting for a day or two, and I am most dead for food and drink."

Dudley had a flask of brandy in his pocket, so that when the Terrier was released a generous draught of the potent liquid put new life into him, but he was so cramped by his long confinement that he was unable to stand.

In a few words he explained what had occurred since the departure of the chief; how he had seen the boy lurking in the neighborhood, and in spite of his disguise recognized that he was one of the messenger-lads. Then how he had enticed the boy into the house, made him a prisoner and conveyed him to one of the under-ground rooms.

"And how on earth he ever got out, gov'nor," he said, in conclusion, "is more than I can get through my noddle, but he *d-d* get out, laid in wait, and fetched me a clip 'side of the head, heavy enough to have laid out an ox; and then, when I come to time ag'in, he had me tied all up, just as you found me. He let the gal out and cheeked me right to my teeth, but when he come to levant, he didn't know the trick of the door, and so he touched the latch, loosed the trap, and down they both went to kingdom come, ho, ho, ho!" and the ruffian laughed, hoarsely.

A sort of half-shudder went through Dudley's form. The captain was a strange man. Used to blood and violence, yet the horrible death of the two unfortunates affected him visibly.

"Both in the pit, eh?"

"Yes, sir; and they hadn't the least idee of the trick," responded the ruffian, with a grin.

"When was this?"

"Well, as near as I can reckon by the feeling of my stomach it was a day ago, at least."

"This is Wednesday night."

"It was Tuesday when they went through."

"Lift up the trap, Jackson, and let us see if we can see anything of them."

The other did as he was ordered, and Dudley flashed the light of the lamp down into the space, and the moment he did so a cry of astonishment broke from his lips.

"By heavens, the water is about all gone, and the game is not here!"

A ladder was instantly procured, and the three descended into the cistern, and once they were at the bottom, the hole through which the fugitives had escaped was in view.

"We must follow them up; if they succeed in getting off, it is good-by to us! They will surely set the police after us for the little game we played in abducting the girl!" Dudley exclaimed.

Through the narrow passage which the water had worn crawled the three, the Terrier in the lead, and at its end found themselves in the deep cellar where the telegraph girl and messenger boy had halted.

But now, the cellar was empty.

Like the fugitives who had preceded them, the three looked around for an outlet, and like them for a time they were baffled in the search. Then Dudley's sharp eyes discovered a small trap-door in one corner of the ceiling, and from certain signs about it, felt sure it had been recently used.

The Terrier was hoisted up on Jackson's shoulders, the door was opened, and the three men ascended through it, to find themselves in the rear part of an old stable. A broken door showed where the fugitives had passed through to the yard, and from it, escape to the street was easy.

"The game is up, boys, and the quicker we look after ourselves the better!" warned the captain.

CHAPTER XXXI.

AN IMPORTANT DISCOVERY.

WE will return now to the Dailys, father and son, whom we have neglected too long.

As the reader will doubtless remember, the two were in search of the orphan ward of the elder Daily, who, to avoid the old man's persecutions, had fled to parts unknown, little thinking that instead of being a poor orphan girl she was the heiress of almost boundless wealth.

Much valuable time had been wasted on account of the niggardliness of the old man, who, while terribly anxious to catch the girl, was unwilling to spend much money in the search.

After his interview with his son, at the Astor House, New York, as detailed in one of the early chapters of our tale, the venerable Daily awoke to the consciousness that either he must spend money freely in the search or else give up all hope of catching the missing girl.

And, though with many a groan he drew the checks for the large sums required in prosecuting the search, yet, as he told his son, since he had got into the thing he was going to go the "hull hog."

But with that saving propensity which had become a second nature to him, when he made up his mind to capture the orphan, no matter how great the cost, and by young John Henry's advice sought the aid of the gentlemen who called themselves private detectives, he applied first to one of the tribe whose business card seductively stated "no money required in advance."

This met old Daily's views exactly. "No cure no pay." If the girl wasn't found he wouldn't have to fee the detective, so he construed the meaning of the card, for it also expressly stated, "Until results are reached no charge will be made for services."

The old man's interview, however, with the private detective firm was very unsatisfactory, although at first everything went on swimmingly. The detectives, who were pleasant and agreeable gentlemen, hadn't the least doubt, after they had heard the old man's story, that they could put their hands on the missing maid inside of four-and-twenty hours, and Daily was beginning to feel comfortable over this assurance, when they upset his composure by a request for "about a hundred dollars for expenses."

"But I thought you didn't want money until you fix the thing all up," the farmer demurred.

"Oh, we are willing to wait for our fee until we settle the whole thing, and are perfectly content, if we do not succeed in doing the job to the entire satisfaction of our patrons, to waive all claims for remuneration; but of course the necessary expenses must be met. It would be simply preposterous for any one to expect us to pay them out of our own pockets."

The old economist was caught. This firm did business precisely as the rest of the tribe, only, instead of a "retaining fee," they called the advance money "expenses." Impressed, though, with the shrewdness of the idea, and concluding that this firm would attend to the business as well as any other, he paid over the hundred dollars and set them to work.

A week passed, but no results. Another, and nothing accomplished. Daily got impatient, but the detectives explained how difficult the case was—it appeared very difficult to them, now that they had his hundred dollars. There was no clew to work upon; the girl might not have come to New York at all. So a month elapsed. Daily began to lose hope; and the detectives, who had given up, from the first, all hopes for success, politely suggested that, as the hundred dollars was now exhausted, it would be necessary for him to advance another hundred or the search be wholly abandoned.

Daily being a church-going man would not indulge in bad language.

"I reckon I've got a hundred dollars' worth of experience, and if I haven't I ain't hankering for any more, for the price is too steep. If you get any information and want to sell it at a reasonable figure, I'm your man, but no more hundred dollars do you get out of me for expenses."

And sick now of his deal with the "private detectives," he determined to seek the advice of the chief of police, and to police headquarters he went.

The farmer was little acquainted with New York, and with matters appertaining to the city, so didn't even know the name of the chief of police, but when he found his way into the presence of that official, the face of the man appeared familiar, although he couldn't remember where he had seen it.

Oh his part, the chief looked at the farmer and stared hard. Evidently he, too, was of the opinion that he had before been face to face with his visitor.

"Sakes alive! It seems to me that I ought to know you!" Daily exclaimed.

"The same idea occurred to me," the official remarked. "I've a capital memory for faces, but I can't place you just now. How may I call your name?"

"Abraham Daily!"

"Ho, ho!" laughed the officer; "well, I declare, Abe Daily, if you ain't just about the last man in the world I expected to see! Why, it's a good thirty years since we went to school together!"

"Gosh! I swear I couldn't remember you to save my gizzard!" and the two old school fellows shook hands heartily. It was their first meeting since they had parted as school-boys, going forth to fight their way through the world.

"What brings you here? I judge, from your appearance, that you are not a resident of the city?" the chief inquired, cordially pressing a chair upon his visitor.

"No; I'm a farmer up in the northern part of the State. I came to New York on a little matter of business, and as I didn't succeed very well, I thought I would come and see the chief of police, thinking I could get some good advice anyway, but I tell you I hadn't the least idea of seeing you."

"Well, sir, I am at your service."

Then the old gentleman proceeded to relate what had brought him to great Gotham.

"Yes, yes, I remember a young man coming about some such business," the chief remarked, "but I didn't know who he was, and as we are pestered all the time by such matters as this, which is entirely out of our line, I presume I didn't give him much encouragement, but in this case, seeing it is you, an old friend, I will strain a point and do what I can for you, although so much time has elapsed since she took French leave, I am afraid the odds are about a thousand to one against your getting on her track, even if she came to the city."

The chief then carefully noted down all the particulars.

"I'll have a general alarm sent out to all the police stations in the city and suburbs, telling the men to keep their eyes peeled for Miss Janet O'Dare, and I will personally instruct the detectives, whose business it is to haunt all public places, to be on the lookout for her. Such a fine-looking girl as you describe ought to attract attention anywhere."

"Yes, yes, she's a beauty; any man that ever sees her once will never be apt to forget her. She is as obstinate, too, and as self-willed as she is handsome. If she wasn't she never would have taken the bit in her mouth and run away in this outrageous manner."

The farmer had been leaning on the chief's desk during this conversation. A large photograph lying among some papers attracted his attention. Carelessly he picked it up, but the moment he got a good view of the picture an exclamation of astonishment broke from his lips.

"What's the matter?" asked the chief astonished.

"This here picture!" Daily fairly gasped.

"Yes, fine-looking gal, ain't she?"

"It's the very one!"

"Very one? I don't understand you."

"It is Janet O'Dare!"

"Oh, no sense, old fellow!" replied the chief; "that picture belongs to our Rogue's Gallery. I suppose you know what the Rogue's Gallery is, eh?"

"Yes, yes; it is where you place the pictures of all criminals who come under your hands."

"Exactly; and this is one of the latest additions. I just received it from the artist this morning. Turn it over and you will find the name, age and peculiar line of business of the party written on the back."

Daily reversed the picture and read the inscription:

"Esther Leigh; seventeen years old; American; shaver of altered checks."

"Exactly; she was caught about a month ago; convicted of passing a check raised from six dollars

to sixty, and sentenced to State prison for three years, and she is now in Sing Sing.

"I don't care what name she has given, it is Janet O'Dare; I am sure of it!"

CHAPTER XXXII.

ON THE TRACK.

For a moment the superintendent hardly knew what to make of this declaration. It did not seem possible that Janet O'Dare, the young and innocent girl, who had run away from her rural home to escape an unwelcome marriage, should, in so short a time, turn up in New York the tool and confederate of a daring and skillful band of check-raisers—for that there were others in the background, whom the law had not been able to reach, all who knew anything about the case felt certain.

"My dear Daily, I fancy you are wrong in this matter. You are misled by some chance resemblance."

"No, no, no! you must remember how I have known this girl for years—have been like a second father to her; so don't think for a moment that I could make any mistake about it. This is the picture of the girl I seek, no matter what she calls herself."

"Well, may I be hanged if I know what to make of it. I took a good deal of interest in this trial, for this girl struck me as being one of the deepest pieces of humanity I have ever come across. Of course, under the circumstances, I couldn't doubt of her guilt, and I did my best to find out who was in the background, for the trick was a neat one and I was anxious to make the acquaintance of the 'mob' who engineered the thing. Why, Daily, somebody has been moving heaven and earth to get the girl pardoned. I have seen some rackets worked, but this one beats the deck. The Governor was in town to-day and I called on him at the Fifth Avenue, having been sent for, and when I got there I found him in a busy confab with one of the most prominent politicians in town. I won't mention names, you know, because it don't do to tell tales out of school. But the Governor said to me, 'How about the case of this girl, Esther Leigh, who was convicted lately for passing an altered check—are you posted about it?' Of course I said I was. 'Well, how does it stand? Was there a clear case made out against the girl? Was there any reasonable doubt in regard to her guilt?' I suspected what was up, naturally; but the question was so plain, and though I would have liked to oblige my friend, the politician—for he's one of the kind that is mighty handy to have on your side sometimes—yet I didn't like to lie about the affair, so I honestly said that in my opinion she had had a fair trial and that there wasn't any reasonable doubt of her guilt, and what rendered her case worse was that it was pretty plain she had some pals in the background who had put her up to the trick, and she had rather go to jail than squeal on them. 'There, you see,' said the Governor to the politician, the moment I was through, 'you see how impossible it is for me to interfere in this matter. I would like to oblige you. I would go to great lengths, indeed, to do you a favor, but if I should pardon this girl, undoubtedly I should have these newspaper fellows all after me, and you know that under the circumstances I am extremely desirous of keeping my record as clear as possible.' The Governor, you see, has an idea that he would be as good a man to succeed himself as can be picked up," the chief added, with a knowing wink.

"So he wouldn't pardon her?"

"He didn't dare to without a good excuse. If I could have backed the politician up by saying the evidence was weak, that there was great doubt about her guilt, his royal ribs would have forked over the document instant, for he is mighty anxious to oblige this party—the politician, you know; you tickle me and I'll tickle you; that's the idea!"

"But, what interest did this man have in the matter—what was the girl to him?"

"Exactly what I asked him, and he replied that he didn't know anything about the young woman—wouldn't know her if he saw her; but a prominent party in his district whom he was anxious to oblige had asked him to get the girl out, and so he had tried his best to work the oracle, and he was the man to do it if anybody could, and if the Governor hadn't been so particular about his record it would have been all right. So you see the girl has got powerful friends, and that don't tally very well with your story of your orphan, running away from home, friendless and alone."

"That is very true; but for all that this picture is the likeness of my heiress, Janet O'Dare, and if the original of this photograph is in Sing Sing prison, then that is where I shall have to look for my fugitive."

"Say! I am getting interested in this deuced affair!" exclaimed the official, abruptly. "I feel a kind of curiosity to know whether you are right or wrong. I can spare a few hours; let's take a train up the river to the prison, and then we can find out what is what and who is who."

"Certainly; I shall be delighted; it is not possible that there can be two girls in the world who can look so much alike."

An hour later and the pair were speeding northward as fast as the iron horse could take them.

On the way up the twain indulged in considerable speculation in regard to the affair, and the chief suggested a probable solution to the riddle.

"Now, if this girl is your girl—and when I come to look at it, there really isn't any reason why she shouldn't be—the chances are that some one of this mob of check-raisers and confidence men—three or four of them always travel together and work in cahoots—made the girl's acquaintance up at Plattsburg and induced her to run away; so the girl is either thoroughly innocent or else she is the deepest girl I ever saw. If she is innocent, I don't see how she was fooled into passing the check, and if she is a regular out-and-out pal of this mob, then the intimacy must have been going on for some time, and you ought to know something about it. Didn't you ever catch any fellows hanging 'round your place?"

"Never!" replied old Daily, emphatically. "I kept too good a watch on the girl for that. If she has gone to the bad it has been since she left my care. I will swear she was as pure, as innocent and as good a girl as this world ever held, up to the hour when she left the shelter of my roof!"

"Mighty puzzling affair," commented the chief.

In due time they arrived before the stern walls of Sing Sing's prison.

The warden and the chief of police were old acquaintances, and the prison official welcomed his guests warmly.

Briefly the chief explained the nature of his business.

"Mr. Daily, from Plattsburg," he said, introducing his companion. "Mr. Daily, who is an old schoolmate of mine, is in trouble. His ward, a girl about eighteen, has levanted. He came to New York after her, thinking she had fled to the city; called upon me; picked up a photo on my desk, a Rogue's Gallery picture, and recognized it as the likeness of his runaway. The name given by the original of the picture on her trial, and inscribed on the back of the picture, is not familiar to my friend, but he is sure he recognizes the face, and of course if it is the girl, nothing is more natural than for her to be sailing under false colors, so we have come up here to interview the lady, as she is at present boarding at your hotel."

"I shall be delighted to oblige you. What is her name?"

"The name under which she was tried and convicted was Esther Leigh."

The warden laughed, and patted the chief familiarly on the shoulder.

"My dear fellow, it is a cold day when you get left, but you are in that fix now."

"Eh? I don't understand."

"You are a leetle late; you should have come earlier."

"Gracious Heavens! you don't mean to say that the girl is dead?" exclaimed Daily.

"Oh, no; not so bad as that; but she's gone."

"Escaped?"

"No, no; mighty few folks succeed in giving leg-bail from this hotel."

"What has become of her then?"

"She has been pardoned."

"Pardoned!" cried the chief and the farmer in a breath.

"Yes, by the Governor; the document arrived this morning, and after the usual formalities were complied with she departed."

"Warden, this has been a cold day for you, for you have been most beautifully left!" exclaimed the chief, in high excitement.

"What on earth do you mean?"

"When was the pardon signed? Did you notice the date?"

"Certainly I did. Oh, the document was all right; it came down from Albany by a special messenger, the Governor's own secretary, and was signed there yesterday."

"The secretary was a fraud, and you have been chiseled out of a prisoner! The Governor has been in New York for two days, and this very morning he told a certain party, right in my presence, who was pressing for the girl's pardon, that on no account would he grant it."

The warden gasped with rage for a moment; then there was a raid on the telegraph office.

Inside of half an hour the declaration of the chief of police was verified; the prisoner had not been pardoned, and the document was a fraud.

It was one of the cleverest escapes that Sing Sing prison had ever known.

The alarm was instantly given, and the warden swore he would retake the girl before nightfall.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

PLANNING THE CAMPAIGN.

As Dudley and his confederates had guessed, the telegraph girl and the messenger boy had managed to escape by the aid of the trap-door in the ceiling—the existence of which they did not discover for some time. In fact, in getting out of the cellar they were only about six hours ahead of their pursuers.

After they got into the street they went straight home to procure a change of garments, for they were covered with mud; and when they had changed their clothes and refreshed themselves with a good meal, they held a council of war.

"Now then, Willy, what is best to be done?" the girl asked. The experience through which she had just gone had made her unusually serious; an anxious look was upon her face, for she fully appreciated the gravity of the situation.

"Hang me if I know," responded the boy, "cept I think we ought to try to get square with them galoots w'ot come precious near murderin' both on us. I tell you what it is, Frankie, if we hadn't got out they would have made mince-meat out on us in that awful hole!"

"Yes, and to you, Willy, I owe my rescue, you dear, good boy!" And in her gratitude she threw her arms around the messenger-boy and hugged him until he was red in the face.

"Say, let up, Frankie!" he protested. "Why, I didn't do nothing at all. I tell you what it is, I ought to had a knife or pistol, and then I could have jabbed or shot that ugly thief all in holes. Blessed if I don't buy a pistol the first chance I git."

"Yes, but what had we better do now? Do you think it wise for us to attempt to measure wits or strength with these desperate men? You see now what they are capable of doing."

"Oh, they are a precious bad lot!"

"Yes, and the ringleader is one who will not hesitate at any crime," she observed, impressively. "I knew he was a bold, bad man, but he is far worse than even I imagined. I am in his way; he recognized me, despite my denial of my identity, and I am satisfied that he will not fail to remove me from his path if it is possible. It is the same man, Willy, who abducted me in that cunning way, that you and I played the spy upon."

"Oh, I guessed it was him! He's a reg'lar out-and-out, but I'll get a pistol, and the next time he tries any of his games on me I will just shoot him full of holes, you see if I don't!"

"I am afraid, Willy, he would not give you a chance. See how cunningly he contrived my capture. I went with the men without any suspicion. Of course I knew the accusation of taking the company's money was all nonsense, but I imagined there had been some mistake about the matter, and when I came to see the president, I should be able to show

my innocence, but that it was a trap, planned by that villain to get me into his power, never entered my mind; I did not have the least suspicion. But now, Willy, since we have escaped, I have been thinking gravely over the matter. This man is a villain; I made that discovery years ago, when he won me to be his bride; and then, when he was disappointed in regard to the money which he expected to get from my father, deserted me in the most cruel manner, and left me to the tender mercies of utter strangers. I thought I knew him, but I am convinced now that I did not comprehend how utterly bad he was. I regarded him as a reckless, unprincipled fellow, eager to make money, without caring much how he got it; but it was as a petty swindler I looked upon him. I did not dream that he would ever be a master-spirit in crime. But the adventures we have gone through have opened my eyes. He has changed since the days I knew him, and has developed into a leader of a band of desperadoes, men who I am sure would not pause at any crime."

"Oh, I am sure of that, Frankie!" Willy declared. "That fellow I welter over the head would just as lief cut a throat as look at a man; you could see it in his face. Why, he looked a good deal more like a dog than a man."

"I am puzzled at one thing," the girl added. "Why should he pursue me with such ferocity? Why is it he is so anxious to get me out of the way? It cannot be possible that he is afraid I can harm him. Of course his position is seemingly a good one; he holds his head high in the world; but even if I should come forward and attempt to claim him as my runaway husband, while it might cause scandal, it could not materially damage him. I am groping in the dark, but I surmise it is extremely necessary to him for me to go away, and thus be certain I cannot trouble him. There is some powerful motive at the bottom of this urgent desire to get rid of me."

And then, all of a sudden, an idea flashed into the girl's mind.

"Oh, what a stupid I am, Willy!" she cried. "The reason is perfectly plain. That girl whom he was about to marry when the police interfered—the girl whose face has puzzled me so much! While I am alive—his lawful wife—he could not legally wed another. That is the reason why he is so anxious to get rid of me."

"Cert!" asserted the boy; "it's as plain as the nose on your face. You could haul him up for bigamy and make it warm for him!"

"Yes, that is the idea, undoubtedly; but now, Willy, let us calmly think this matter over. We have been playing the role of detectives; but so far this villain has easily beaten us at our own game. Of course, I had no idea that he was chief of a powerful league of desperadoes, as he evidently is, or I should never have attempted to measure strength with him. But with all his cunning, I think now I have the best of the situation. By this last outrage he has put himself in the grasp of the law, and if I am not strong enough to fight him the law is, and I will at once invoke its aid."

"That's just bully!" and the boy jumped to his feet in the exuberance of his glee, and executed a sort of a war-dance around the room. "Oh, I tell you what it is, Frankie, I would just go for him red-hot!"

"I will! The first thing to-morrow morning, I will go before the proper authorities and make a complaint. But, Willy, hadn't I better see a lawyer first so as to find out which is the best way to go about it? It won't do to make any mistake when we have such a dangerous and unscrupulous adversary to contend with."

The boy assumed a wise look and said he thought the idea was good.

"But, whom shall I go to? Do you know any good lawyer?"

Willy instantly replied that he did, and he mentioned the name of one of New York's greatest men at the bar.

"I carry messages to him every day; he's a real nice man, and when he was a-jokin' me the other day, I ax him if he'd see me through if I got into any trouble, and he laughed and said so long as I didn't run away with over a million of dollars, he would try and do all he could for me. You come right along with me, and I'll bet you he'll tell you the best way to go to work to put salt on the tail of this galoot who is so fresh with his cellars, a-looking people up and a-keeping them on bread and water!"

"Very well; in the morning then we will go to him."

The two then separated, to seek the rest that tired nature so eagerly craved.

Bright and early in the morning they were up, and after breakfast sought the advice of the distinguished legal gentleman who had promised to befriend the messenger.

Although not expecting to be called upon so soon to redeem his word, yet he was willing so to do.

The story which the telegraph girl told astounded him. He was slightly acquainted with Dudley, and was at first inclined to believe there must be some mistake about the matter, but Frances stood his cross-examination in the most perfect manner, and the boy's evidence corroborated all her statements.

"You had better come with me to the chief of police," he said, after cogitating over the affair for a few moments. "This is a matter that comes within his province, and his advice will be valuable. The chances are, too, that he will be able to take immediate action."

Within half an hour's time the three were closeted with the superintendent of police.

This was in the morning of the day succeeding the one on which the chief and the old farmer had made their fruitless journey to Sing Sing.

Tick Tick told her story in detail, and the chief, listening with the utmost attention, realized that at last he had got hold of a clew which would help him to unravel the mystery attending the wonderful escape of Esther Leigh from Sing Sing prison.

It was all plain to him now. He knew of Dudley, suspected that he was a rather fast young man, but had no idea there was anything crooked about him; but now, lo and behold, he had suddenly developed into the captain of a most dangerous band.

"I'll put him through, young lady!" he cried, emphatically. "You can bet all you're worth on that! Before the day is out, I'll have him safe and sound!"

CHAPTER XXXIV.

ON THE TRACK.

The telegraph girl and Willy Woolley, accompanied by the chief of police, went before a magistrate, and swore out warrants, and armed with these documents, the official set his sleuths at work.

The chief was in high spirits, and immediately telegraphed to the warden at Sing Sing that he had got on the right track.

The girl convict was traced from the prison to the depot, where she took a northward-bound train—"A trick to throw pursuit off the track!" exclaimed the warden, immediately, and the police chief agreed with him, for it was much more likely the girl would come to New York; a great city affords far more chance for a criminal to escape pursuit than a small country place.

By a lucky accident they encountered the conductor of the train on which the young woman had journeyed up the Hudson, and he, with that wonderful memory for faces which is so indispensable to railroad men, in his position, remembered his passenger at once.

"Yes, she paid her fare to Fishkill," he said; "she wanted to go to Newburg, and I told her she must go to Fishkill, and cross from there to Newburg by ferry."

"And she got off at Fishkill?" the warden asked. "Oh, yes; I saw her get off the car, and walk down toward the Newburg ferry."

The pair took the first train for Fishkill, although sure they were on a false scent. They were certain they understood the ruse. The fugitive was doubling on her track like a hunted fox. She hadn't any idea of crossing the river from Fishkill to Newburg, and she had made these particular inquiries of the conductor for the purpose of enabling him to remember her, so that when the hue and cry was set up, he would be able to testify in regard to the direction in which she had gone, and so throw her hunters on a false scent. They would cross the river, and seek for her in Newburg, while she, instead of crossing, would slip on a train, and come back to the city.

It was an old dodge, and it was not the first time the superintendent had run afoul of it. The warden, too, was up to the trick; but just for the sake of making sure, they inquired of the ferry hands, and to their astonishment found that the girl had crossed the river and had not come back.

The attractive appearance of Esther had excited general attention; hence it was an easy matter to trace her.

So over the ferry the two went.

"Let me see; there's a railroad from Newburg to New York on the west side of the river, isn't there?" the chief asked.

"Yes, a branch of the Erie."

"That is it for a thousand dollars! That was her little game! She crossed the river here, and took a train back to the city by that line."

It appeared probable, and the warden assented.

One thing, though, puzzled the trackers: The girl had left the prison in company with the gentleman who had brought her pardon, but at the depot she was alone, alone on the train, and alone when she crossed the ferry, as far as diligent inquiry would show. The man had dropped out somewhere.

At Newburg they easily got on the track of the girl again. She had been seen to leave the boat and walk up toward the main street of the town, but there all traces of her disappeared.

Newburg is a good-sized little city, renowned for the beauty of its daughters, and for a handsome girl to promenade the main street was no such uncommon thing as to excite any particular attention.

The railroad depots were visited but not the slightest clew could be obtained. The conductors were questioned but without avail.

"Some place was provided for her in the town; she slipped into it, and then she might have gone down the river on a boat," the chief observed.

"She may still be concealed here," the warden suggested.

"Very true, but I hardly think it; it would be too risky. In a small city like this a girl of her attractive appearance would be apt to excite attention and cause remark."

"She might keep concealed until the affair blows over."

"Well, the only thing for us to do is to put the police here on the watch, but, somehow, I can't bring myself to believe that she is here, for she has apparently been too deuced careless in this thing. Her true game was to hold her tongue and not attract notice, instead of asking all manner of questions, so that people would be apt to remember her. It has been done on purpose, I tell you; she leaves the trail open to this town and then suddenly jumps the track. The idea is to make the pursuit think she is hiding somewhere in the town, and while precious time is wasted in trying to hunt her up here, she will get off to such a distance as to defy recapture."

There was sound sense in this and the warden could not dispute it.

The police were notified. All the stables in the town were visited, the idea being that the fugitive might have had a confederate waiting for her with a horse and wagon to drive her out of Newburg. Nothing came of this, however, and at last, somewhat disgusted at their ill-luck, the pair retraced their way.

"Depend upon it she is in New York by this time!" the chief exclaimed, as he parted from the warden at Sing Sing station, "and if she is in the city I'll have her!"

The warden replied that he "hoped so," then the pair shook hands, the warden went back to his gloomy stone pile, and the chief came on to the city as fast as the iron horse could fetch him.

And in this state were matters when the telegraph girl and the messenger-boy astounded the chief with their revelations.

The man in the background—the "main guy" who pulled the wires which made the puppets dance, was the party the police chief was after, and now that the girl had denounced Almon Dudley as a dangerous scoundrel, a villain who would not stop even at murder if he could profit thereby, the chief felt that he held the winning cards. He would nab Mr. Almon Dudley instant, and, even if he did not find the escaped convict in his company, he would

probably procure a clew which would surely lead to her capture.

Two different resorts had the man whose company was now so much desired by the superintendent of the New York police: the brown-stone palace on the avenue and the old rookery in Roosevelt street.

"The den in Roosevelt street is the place for night-work," soliloquized the chief. "There won't be much use of looking for him there in the daytime. The house on the avenue is the most likely place to nab him, but in order to make assurance doubly sure, I will send a squad to each place."

He determined to head the avenue squad himself, for he knew he was dealing with a master-hand, and did not want to leave open a single loop-hole through which the prey might escape.

Six detectives, in plain clothes, accompanied him, and when he reached the corner of the block in which the house occupied by Dudley was situated he called a halt in order to survey the ground.

"This is a sharp fellow—no common rascal, but a regular Napoleon of a scamp," he observed to his "boys." "If we march up to the front door in force, the chances are he will give leg-bail over the fence and get out through the house back of his on the other street. Such a fellow as this, you know, has undoubtedly calculated that an explosion would come some time, and has prepared for it; so two of you post yourselves in the next street, so you can lasso him if he tries to get out that way. I'll walk up to the door and ring, and the rest of you saunter up slowly. One of you take charge of the basement, another one of the main entrance after I gain admission, and the rest accompany me through the house. I've no doubt we will have a deuce of a search, but if he is in the house we will have him."

Having thus arranged the plan of operations, the "army" advanced.

The chief ascended the steps and rung the bell, and in answer to it the man named Jackson made his appearance.

The official stared at him for a moment sharply, but Jackson bore the scrutiny with perfect composure.

"Hallo, hallo!" exclaimed the superintendent, "I think I have seen you before, somewhere!"

"I don't know, sir," replied Jackson, with becoming humility.

"I nabbed you once for burglary over in Third avenue, and you got two years for it."

"For Heaven's sake, sir, don't speak so loud!" implored Jackson, affecting to be much alarmed. "I'm on the square, now, indeed I am! I served my time and came out determined to have nothing more to do with any crookedness, so don't be hard on a poor fellow and blow on me!"

"If you are on the square, you're all right, but if you ain't, look out, that's all! But where is your master?"

"Mr. Dudley?"

"Yes, that's the man."

"Don't know, sir; he hasn't been home for two days."

CHAPTER XXXV.

A VAIN QUEST.

"Oh, come, come! that is entirely too thin," remarked the chief. "We won't have that, you know, at all."

"Thin or not, sir, it is the truth," replied Jackson, with a "wish I may die if it ain't so" manner.

"He is not in the house now, then?"

"No, sir."

"And of course you haven't the slightest idea of what has become of him?"

"Why, no, sir; how should I know?"

"How do you call yourself now?"

"Jackson, sir."

"Black Jack is what your pals used to call you, I believe?"

The man lifted up his hands with an imploring gesture.

"Oh, sir, for goodness' sake, don't say anything about that now. I have reformed, indeed I have, and I am strictly on the square, now; you will not find anything crooked about me."

"That game won't work, Mr. Jackson; the jig is up, and the quicker you make a clean breast of it, the better!" the chief exclaimed, decidedly. "I am telling you this as a friend, mind—giving it to you as straight as a string. The thing is played! We've got a warrant for your head devil, and we are going in to break up the gang."

A look of profound amazement appeared upon the face of the man.

"Well, upon my word, sir, I didn't know that there was anything wrong about the boss!" he protested. "He always appeared like a perfect gentleman to me, and if he was crooked, I swear I didn't know it."

"Oh, you are an innocent duck, you are!" sneered the official. "Well, your boss is crooked, you're crooked, too, and I reckon every one else in the house is in the same boat; anyway, we're going to 'pull' the whole concern."

"You won't find anything wrong here, sir, as far as I know, and although I don't deny that I was a member of the dangerous class once, I defy you or anybody else to find anything wrong in my record since I came out of the State prison. I served my time like a man, and I'm not afraid of any examination as far as I'm concerned. As for my boss, I don't know anything about him except that he pays me my wages regular, and is all square and above-board as far as I know."

When "Mr. Jackson" showed his teeth in this decided manner the superintendent understood that his raid had been expected and everything had been made safe, therefore his chances of securing the wily Mr. Dudley were extremely small; but then, it was just possible that a huge game of bluff was being played, and the man he sought might be concealed in the house.

So Mr. Jackson was informed that he was a prisoner and requested to conduct the officers over the house.

"I haven't any warrant for you, but I'm going to take you along on suspicion," the chief explained.

"Oh, it's all right, sir; I haven't the least objection. I am not at all afraid, because I know I haven't done anything, and after you look into my record you will be obliged to let me go; but I tell you, honest, chief, you are only wasting time in

looking over the house, because the boss is not here."

"Well, it will satisfy my mind, anyway. Who is in the house?"

"Two servants—cook and a chambermaid."

"Nobody else?"

"Myself."

"Yes, but who ran the house for this Dudley?"

"His half-sister, Miss Madeline Durang."

"And where is she?"

"Went away this morning."

"Where to?"

"Don't know, sir; she didn't say. All the word she left was that she was going out of town, and would not be home for a day or two."

"Both of them got out like rats from a sinking ship, and left you to run the machine, eh?"

"Yes, sir, that is about the size of it."

"They expected a visit from me and skedaddled without ceremony," the chief observed to one of the detectives.

The house was examined from cellar to garret in the most thorough manner, but the search was a fruitless one. In fact nothing suspicious was discovered.

The two servants, whom the chief carefully questioned, told straightforward stories, supporting Jackson in his statement that Mr. Dudley had not been home for two days.

There wasn't anything out of the way about the two women, either, although, from being associated with Jackson, the chief had expected to find in them some well-known characters, but they were only plain, ordinary servants, who were scared almost out of their wits when they discovered that the visitors were policemen.

After the search was over the chief held a whispered consultation with the leading detective.

"How about this fellow?" he asked, indicating Jackson with a nod, "we can't really hold him, you know; there hasn't been any charge made against him."

"I wouldn't try to hold him. What good will it do? He's a tough customer, and if he does know anything, we wouldn't be able to scare it out of him in a month of Sundays. Why not let him go? Tell him that you are satisfied he is on the square now, and that you don't wish to throw any obstacles in the way of his getting an honest living—"

"And at the same time keep a watch upon him, so that if he attempts to communicate with Dudley we can track him," added the superintendent.

"Exactly! and if he thinks we don't suspect him, he will be off his guard, and perhaps we may be able to do the trick."

"I shouldn't be surprised. Well, you attend to the shadowing business."

"All right; I'll wire h-a-d-quarters at once for two of our best men; we mustn't put any botches on this job, for this fellow isn't any slouch."

The detective departed. The chief sat down and busied himself with a newspaper for about half an hour, so as to gain time for the "shadows"—as the spies of the detective department are popularly known—to arrive.

Then when he thought he had allowed sufficient time for them to get to their posts, he addressed Jackson, who had been sitting in the back parlor, chatting with one of the detectives as unconcerned as possible.

"Well, Jackson," remarked the superintendent, "I guess we will have to let up on you this time. I don't exactly see that we have any just grounds for holding you."

"That is just what I said, sir," responded the man, pleasantly. "Bless your soul, sir, I ain't been at all alarmed. I'm too old a bird not to know the ins and outs of the law. I've done time in Sing Sing, I know, and that is ag'in' me, but you can't haul a man over the coals and send him up twice for the same offense. I worked the racket, got caught, and was sent to the stone jug, and that is all there is to it."

"I am glad to know that you are living on the square now, though it is kinder suspicious your being in with this fellow."

"I wish I may die if I in the least suspected there was anything crooked about him; but, what is the trouble, anyway?"

"You want to know how big the explosion was, and how much damage has been done, eh?" responded the chief, with a wink. "Oh, no, my friend; that little information I will keep to myself. I don't mind telling you, though, that your boss is 'wanted,' and wanted pretty bad, and that I mean to have him if he don't manage to give me the slip and get out of the country, and if you are wise and on the square, as you say, you will be careful not to get mixed up with him."

"Oh, I'll look out; I ain't anxious to go up the river again," Jackson returned, with a solemn countenance.

"Look out for yourself, then!" and with this warning the chief departed, followed by his satellites.

"It's a big burst-up or else the chief would not have come in person," Jackson mused, as he stood by the front window and watched the officers go down the street. "And it all comes from that infernal woman, I'll be bound! He never will let these women alone, and they will send him up for a good long term one of these days. If he had taken my advice he wouldn't have troubled this one, for the odds were a hundred to one that she wouldn't have troubled him; but he was determined to get the first blow at her, as he called it, and the result has been a general smash-up; and we were going along so nicely too! But it's ended now. We must fold our tents and depart. If we succeed in this new trick we won't be so badly off, and we will succeed beyond a doubt if we can only keep the detectives off the track. I suppose the house is watched and they will endeavor to shadow me, but that is a game two can play at."

Jackson waited until nightfall, then took his hat and went out.

As he expected there was a detective watching the house, but he did not appear to notice Jackson.

"Too thin!" muttered Jackson; "there's more dangerous ones behind."

And, sure enough; at the corner one of the "shadows" came after him, and so shrewdly did the spy work, that it was some time before the man detected that he was followed; but when he ascer-

tained that it was so, he immediately took measures to baffle the watcher.

His mode of operations was extremely simple. He took a train on the Elevated road, rode past six or eight stations, then got off, went down into the street; then ascended to the station again, timing his movements so as to just catch a train, which the shadow was unable to reach.

Jackson grinned as he beheld the spy dash frantically upon the platform, just too late for the train.

"Oho, my boy!" he cried; "I fixed you that time. I reckon; and now if we don't marry the heiress and snatch her money, I'm a Dutchman!"

CHAPTER XXXVI.

WALAKER CORNERED.

JOHN JEFFERSON WALAKER sat in his sumptuously-furnished parlor, which was literally crowded with rare and costly articles.

It was night, the gas was lit, curtains drawn; and, enjoying a costly cigar in his favorite easy-chair, the old book-binder seemed at peace with himself and all the world.

But he was not; there was a vacant look upon his face, a far-away expression in his eyes which plainly betokened a mind ill at ease.

He had lain down upon the sofa for a comfortable after-dinner nap, but had been so troubled by bad dreams that he was glad to get up and seek the soothing solace of a cigar.

The dreams had been extremely ugly ones; perfectly preposterous dreams for such a man as J. Jefferson Walaker to have, and he was terribly annoyed that even in his sleep such ideas should haunt his mind.

He had dreamed that he was in a prison—in a narrow cell and through the barred window in the door he was gazing out upon the gloomy corridor. He had surveyed his person, noticing that he was not attired as usual, and was horrified to find that his respectable form was arrayed in the striped suit of the convict. Then the truth flashed upon him; he was in a prison and was a prisoner! A light footfall resounded through the corridor; he had gazed eagerly out, only to draw back in dismay upon meeting the accusing glance of persecuted Esther Leigh!

Then the scene had changed all of a sudden, as it does in dreamland, without rhyme or reason. He was standing on a scaffold and a masked hangman was adjusting a rope around his neck, while a jeering multitude howled below.

"Your false accusation murdered Esther Leigh!" cried the hangman, in a sonorous voice which reverberated through his ears like the clang of a mighty bell, "and now you must hang by the neck until you are dead—dead—dead!" and the horrid word seemed to sear into his very brain.

With a start and a cry of terror he had awakened, and not until he had glared around him for a moment and made sure he was safe in his own parlor did he realize that it was all a dream.

But, though nothing but a dream, it had terribly shaken his nerves.

"Bless my soul! the idea of my being hanged and all on account of that stiff-necked, obstinate girl!" he muttered. Then he rung for his valet, and ordered some brandy and a cigar.

After a good big glass of brandy was swallowed, and he got his cigar lighted, he felt a little better, though still the remembrance of his dreams haunted him unpleasantly.

"Curse the girl!" he murmured; "I wish I had never seen her! It wasn't my fault that she was convicted; she could have got out of the scrape easily enough if she hadn't been the greatest idiot that ever lived; but it is just like some of these women—they never know on what side their bread is buttered."

A servant interrupted the old binder's meditation with the intelligence that Mr. William Sneed of the bindery desired to see him.

"Sneed, eh? I wonder what he wants?" the employer mused. "I haven't liked the way he has been going on lately; if I didn't know that he was a model young man and never drank anything, I should be inclined to think he had been on a terrible and prolonged spree."

The servant was directed to usher him in and soon Sneed stood before his principal.

The clerk was not a person calculated to make a favorable impression upon a good judge of mankind, for he was lanky in build, thin in face, with a sanctimonious air that was plainly assumed.

"Well, Sneed, what can I do for you?" the book-binder asked, with the lordly, patronizing air which he invariably used to his dependents.

"Are we alone, sir—is there danger that our conversation may be overheard?" Sneed asked, using the humble, deprecating tone common to him.

Sneed's eyes were fixed upon the large doors which divided the parlors and which were now almost closed.

"There isn't any one in that room; you can speak without fear," Walaker replied, somewhat astonished at this beginning.

"What I have to say, sir, is very important, and it wouldn't do for anybody but you to hear it."

"Indeed! Why, you really amaze me! What is the matter?"

"My health is not very good, Mr. Walaker, and I have come to the conclusion that a trip across the water will do me a world of good."

The book-binder stared.

"A trip across the water?" he exclaimed.

"Yes, a little run over to England—total rest from all business cares, you know. Then a trip to the continent, and while I am about it I suppose I may as well take in Egypt and the Nile."

"Yes, yes; but all this costs money! By Jove! sir, do you know that your 'little trip' will stand you in a cool thousand dollars?"

"Certainly; I don't really expect to get off under two thousand. I am not going to be in any hurry, you know; just take it easy—six months, or I shouldn't mind if it takes up the better part of the year."

"A fool and his money are soon parted," growled the old man, annoyed that a mere clerk should talk of a costly European trip in this light manner.

"Yes; the money is all that troubles me," Sneed observed, "and that is why I came to you."

The book-binder sat upright in his chair and glared at the clerk, but Sneed—to use the slang saying—was possessed of truly colossal cheek, and went on, never heeding the angry look of his employer.

"Yes, I thought you would be willing to make me a present of two or three thousand for this trip, and if you want me to, I will agree to stay abroad, and then you will feel perfectly safe."

"What! I give you two or three thousand dollars!" exploded Walaker. "Young man, you are crazy! and what on earth does it matter to me where you are?"

"I thought you would feel more safe if you knew I was out of the country."

"Safe? What do you mean?"

"Why, about this girl affair."

Walaker's under jaw dropped—the shot had hit him hard.

"Girl affair?" he cried, endeavoring to appear calm. "I don't understand you."

"Oh, yes, you do, governor; you know what I mean well enough. No use to try and play innocent about it. I thought you were up to some deviltry when you told me to make out her check, and so I watched you."

"You watched me?" Walaker gasped.

"Yes, there's a little crack in the partition at the back part of the office where the boards have parted, warped by the heat. By means of the crack I could see everything you did inside. I put her envelope on top of the rest, for I had an idea that there was going to be some monkey business with it, and after I laid them down on your desk and went outside I put my eyes to the crack instantly. I saw you take up the top envelope—Miss Esther Leigh's envelope—I could easily identify it by a blot of ink that I purposely made in one corner. You forced it open—it was easily enough done, for it had just been sealed and the gum was yet wet. You took out the check and with your own pen you made the alteration in the amount, changing six into sixty, for which crime the unfortunate girl got a three years' sentence in the State Prison. I heard you chuckle to yourself, and you said—'Now then, if she is ugly I can force her to do as I bid.' Then you replaced the check, sealed the envelope and placed it at the bottom of the pile. And when you gave her the envelope, again I played the spy and overheard the whole conversation. Now then, respected sir, isn't it worth a couple of thousand dollars for me to hold my tongue?"

By this time Walaker had recovered his composure; he had thought over the situation and saw a way to parry the blow.

"You are a very shrewd young man," he remarked, "but not quite so shrewd as you think you are. This story of yours is a wonderful affair."

"It is all true!"

"Every word, and yet you can't make any two thousand dollars out of me by it. Now that we are alone, and no witnesses by, I will admit to you that I was fool enough to lay a trap for the girl—fool enough to commit a crime in order to get her into my power, and I have heartily repented of it; nay, more—I have used all my influence to procure the girl's pardon, and I will never rest until I get her out; then she can go to blazes for all I care, but you can't prove this. It is my word against yours, and you haven't any witnesses."

"Haven't I?" and Sneed laughed. "Come in, gentlemen; the game is bagged!"

Then to Walaker's horror from the back parlor came his nephew, Martin, and a quiet-looking gentleman to him unknown.

"This is an infamous snare!" cried the book-binder, white with fear and rage.

"You are merely caught in your own trap," Martin observed sternly. "This gentleman and myself are witnesses to your confession of how fearfully you have wronged this poor girl; and now that wrong must be righted, even though the name of Walaker be trailed in the very dust."

The book-binder saw that he was in the toils, and that no escape was possible.

"Look here, gentles!" exclaimed Sneed, abruptly. "I'll tell you a way to fix up the thing. I want a couple of thousand dollars bad, for I've got to get out of the country. Governor, just you fork over the mopuses, and I will write a confession that I did the trick just to spite the girl, and that will clear her all right without smirching anybody but me, and I can stand it."

The old man was humbly glad to accept the proposition.

The statement was drawn out and witnessed in due form. Sneed received his money and went forth into the darkness, the wreck of a once model young man, and was nevermore seen in New York.

An hour later the two Walakers waited upon the Governor, and when they came away, Martin bore with him the pardon of Esther Leigh.

But where was the maid?

CHAPTER XXXVII.

A GRAND COUP.

LITTLE wonder that the acute bloodhounds of the law were not able to hunt down the fugitive, when it is considered that all the details of her flight were arranged by one of the smartest criminals who ever laughed at the terrors of the law.

After Dudley had failed to persuade Esther to escape from the prison, he saw that desperate measures must be taken; therefore the false pardon was brought into play, and so skillfully was the thing managed that the prisoner was released without a question.

She herself, of course, had not the slightest suspicion that the document was not a genuine one.

The pretended secretary supplied her with money and directed her how to proceed. He explained that he was a particular friend of Mr. Dudley, and told her it was to that gentleman she owed her release.

The track over which the sleuth-hounds of the law came was indeed the one pursued by the girl.

She had been directed to proceed to Newburg, and after crossing the ferry to walk up the hill to the main street, then to turn to her right, and as she did so she was saluted by Dudley, who was stationed there in a buggy.

He told her to jump in, gave her a thick blue veil,

and suggested that she had better put it over her face so as to protect it from the wind. Esther complied, although she thought it very strange, never suspecting that it was a clever dodge on his part to prevent her face from being noticed as they drove through the town.

Straight southward he went, following the course of the river, and did not halt until twenty odd miles were covered.

This brought them into the neighborhood of Haverstraw, and a short distance above the brick-making village, on the banks of the river, Dudley had a little summer cottage.

It was a retired spot off the main road, not liable to be visited by strangers, and was about as secure a hiding-place as the wit of man could well have devised.

Miss Durang was in waiting to receive Esther, and overwhelmed her with caresses.

"My poor, dear girl!" she exclaimed, with true French enthusiasm, folding her to her heart. "The persecution to which you have been subjected is perfectly horrible; but it is all over now, and you are safe here in the home of your friends, and our love will very soon make you forget your trials."

Then she was conducted to her apartment, where everything that the mind of man or the art of woman could think of had been provided.

Forced by the necessity of the situation, Dudley had been obliged to allow the Frenchwoman to know all his plans in regard to the girl.

Just by accident, through the drunken indiscreetness of a lawyer's confidential clerk in the town of Plattsburg, Dudley had learned that the supposed poor orphan girl, Janet O'Dare, was in reality the heiress of an immense fortune.

Dudley had come to Plattsburg with some "cracksmen" with whom he sometimes worked, with designs upon one of the banks of that flourishing little town; but as the bank happened to be rather better guarded than the gentlemen of the sledge, fuse and "jimmy" expected, they had given up the job and retreated.

Dudley remained behind, determined to make the maid his prey, but before he could procure an introduction to her she fled from her home, driven desperate by the endeavors of her guardian to arrange a marriage between his son and herself.

The adventurer happened to be in the neighborhood of the depot and recognized the girl as she went on board the cars. Without a moment's hesitation he followed, and in that fascinating, insinuating way which became him so well, managed to make her acquaintance, and by the time they had reached New York he had succeeded in making an impression upon the susceptible heart of the orphan. The rest of the tale the reader knows.

And when the Frenchwoman understood that by marrying the maid Dudley would get a chance at the immense fortune which had been bequeathed to her by her dead father, her scruples vanished.

"Marry her a dozen times if you like, provided you get hold of the money!" she cried.

And now at last the road seemed clear. The girl was safely in Dudley's power, and all he had to do was to marry her as soon as possible.

But when, in the most delicate manner possible, he suggested to her that there was no longer any obstacle to their union, Esther seemed averse to the thought of being married so soon.

"I am not well," she pleaded; "that terrible prison seems to have crushed the very heart in my breast. Give me time to recover."

"Oh, certainly!" Dudley had replied; "but do not keep me waiting any longer than you can help. I count the anxious moments until I shall have the right to call you mine."

But for all these fair words the schemer was terribly annoyed.

"The cup is at my lips again," he muttered.

"The first time all seemed fair for me to win, and yet I lost; and now I am on thorns until the ceremony is over. What does it mean? Why is she not anxious to become mine? Is it possible that with the fickleness of woman her liking for me has changed? By Heaven! if it is so, I pity her, for by either fair means or foul I am determined she shall be mine!"

The arrival of Jackson with the news that the police were hot on the scent annoyed Dudley greatly, although Jackson was perfectly sure there was no immediate danger.

"You needn't be alarmed, sir," he said. "They had the shadows on my track but I got away from them in the easiest manner possible. Bless you! I'm no chicken! I've dodged police spies before, in my life, and I tell you, sir, the men who track me when I don't want their company will have to get up precious early in the morning!"

But for all this Dudley felt most uncomfortable.

"That infernal woman!" he muttered. "She never brought me anything but ill-luck. I married her years ago, Jackson, expecting to make a big haul out of the affair, and didn't get sixpence for my pains; and I had to cut and run, too, for the officers came down on me, and that let the cat out of the bag. I had a stormy interview with her the night I fled. I was ugly and didn't mince matters, I can tell you, but she was game to the backbone. I told her exactly what I was, and urged her to fly with me—told her, too, why I had married her, and I threw in a side remark about having half a dozen wives already. I tell you I never shall forget the look the little vixen gave me. My words crushed all the love out of her heart, and in its place came a wild desire for vengeance. She swore she would follow me through the world and never rest content until she had seen me in the hands of justice. I didn't have time to argue with her just then, upon the foolishness of such a course, for I was afraid the detectives would be down on me every minute, so I merely gave her my blessing and lit out. I ought to have taken your advice, though, when I encountered her in the ferry-house, and let her alone."

"Yes, yes; it would have been best, but as it is you have put a very devil on your track."

"It is fate," returned the other, in a sullen way. "And I am not sure that it would have made any difference. When I saw how she had disguised her appearance, I felt sure she was on the lookout for me, and, although years had passed, the desire for vengeance was still fresh in his heart. It is too late now to mend matters; crying over spilt milk won't

replace it in the vessel. The mischief is done, and the only thing is to hurry this match forward as fast as possible and get out of the way until this breeze is over. It will be some few months, anyway, before I can get hold of this girl's money, and the time might as well be spent abroad as anywhere."

"Have you arranged about the marriage?"

"No," and a scowl disfigured Dudley's handsome face; "the maiden has become coy all of a sudden, and pleads for time."

Jackson shook his head.

"That is bad," he observed; "time is exactly the thing that we cannot afford to waste, just now. Although for the present we have succeeded in throwing the hounds off the track, there's no telling when they may strike in upon the trail again."

"That's very true, and we *must* have the ceremony take place as soon as possible."

"Yes, so that we can get out of the way before the chase becomes so hot as to cut off all retreat. Say, why wouldn't it be a good idea to pretend that the Dailys are in the neighborhood, and that unless she is married to you they will take her away with them?"

"A capital idea!" Dudley exclaimed, exultingly. "And it will work, too, beyond a doubt; and if by any chance it should fail, and the girl is obstinate, then we must use force, and the union must take place whether she is willing or not. Our friend, McEnery, will be here to-night. I summoned him on purpose. He is a justice of the peace, and if we give him a good fat fee will tie the knot no matter how much the girl protests against it."

Esther—or Janet O'Dare, as we shall call her hereafter, giving her her true name—had revealed to her lover all the particulars regarding her flight from the Daily mansion, and her change of name in order to baffle pursuit, thinking, of course, that he knew nothing about her.

"That is right! Settle the affair to-night, and then get out before these infernal scoundrels close in around us. You see, you put your foot in it when you abducted the other one. If it hadn't been for that little affair the police would not be able to get a pull on you."

"To-morrow morning will see me out of their reach!" he cried.

And he was right in this assertion: a time was soon to prove.

Dudley matured his plan, and after supper was over and the darkness of night came on, he proceeded to put it into execution.

In tremulous haste, and with a countenance that betokened great nervous agitation, he entered the apartment occupied by Miss O'Dare.

"The worst has happened!" he exclaimed, hurriedly.

The girl, who was seated by the window gazing out into the night, turned in alarm.

"Oh, what is the matter?" she demanded.

"Your persecutors—the Dailys, father, and son, have tracked you here, and I expect to have them thundering at the door every minute, determined to take you back."

"Is it possible?" she exclaimed, starting to her feet in alarm.

"Yes; and I cannot deny them admission, you know, for they have come armed with the proper authority given them by the law, and even if I should be foolish enough to attempt to resist, they would force their way in, and then drag you back and compel you to the marriage which you shrink from with loathing."

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

A SURPRISE.

JANET wrung her hands wildly, while her face plainly betrayed the agitation under which she labored.

"Oh, this is terrible!" she moaned.

"There is only one way to avert the danger!" he announced.

"Is there a way?"

"There is, if you are willing to follow the course I point out."

"I will do anything to escape from a fate!" the girl assured. "I would rather go into my grave than marry that man, for I do not love him, and I am sure I never will!"

"Come with me then, instantly, for there is no time to be lost! You can escape this danger by my plan if you are willing to follow it."

"Yes, yes; let us hurry! Oh, I was sure there was danger, for I thought I saw some dark forms lurking in the shrubbery out yonder."

It was now Dudley's turn to be alarmed.

"Indeed! Where?" he asked, approaching the window cautiously, and glancing out.

"I could not tell you exactly, but I fancied I saw figures passing beyond the bushes yonder," and she pointed to a certain clump of little trees which had grown up by the fence.

"Ah, they were in the road, then—the street is just beyond those bushes. How long ago?"

"Ten minutes, I should think."

This announcement removed a weight from Dudley's mind. It was just about ten minutes ago that Jackson had returned with the rascally old justice of the peace—a confederate of the gang of which Dudley was the chief, who had agreed to marry the girl to his comrade, whether she was willing or not, provided he was well paid for his trouble.

But Dudley did not tell the girl that the persons whom she saw passing were friends, for it was his game to let her believe her pursuers were near.

"No doubt it was your persecutors whom you saw," he remarked, gravely. "We must hurry on, then, with our preparations, so that we will be able to bid defiance to them when they come."

"Oh, yes; do not let us lose any time."

To the parlor, upon the ground floor, Dudley conducted the girl. Miss Durang and Jackson were there, together with a middle-aged, gross-looking stranger, whom Dudley introduced to Janet as Justice McEnery.

"This gentleman is a justice of the peace," Dudley whispered, rapidly, in the ear of the embarrassed girl, "and by the laws of this State is authorized to solemnize marriages. The only possible way to save you from your enemies is to consent to wed with me now. Give me a husband's right, and I can laugh at the Dailys when they come to claim you."

The girl grew as white as a sheet, and for a moment tottered as though she had lost the strength

of her limbs. Dudley hastened to support her, thinking she would fall.

Ja et was dazed; for a moment the room and all within it seemed to swim around her, and then she recovered the use of her speech, and gasped:

"No, no, it cannot be! I am not fit to marry any one now. I must have time—I am sick! I do not know what I am doing! Oh, in mercy spare me!"

"It must be! Circumstances imperatively demand it. It is but a civil union, you know; it is not like being married in a church and by a minister; the only reason I urge it is so that I can have some shadow of right to protect you from your enemies. Of course, under the circumstances, I sha'n't consider it a marriage; it is only a mere form, you know, so that I can bid the Dailys begone when they come. Surely you would rather go through this empty ceremony and remain here with me, the man you love, than to be dragged off and forced to wed with this cub of a Daily, the man whom you detest with all your heart? You have given me your word, too, to become my wife; Esther, you are not going to prove yourself recreant to the solemn promise? Remember, we are as good as half married already, for if that atrocious old scoundrel had not come rushing into the church when we stood before the altar, a minute more would have made us man and wife. Come, dearest; it is but to save you from the awful peril that now menaces all your future life! Trust in my love and be guided by me!"

"Master, there are some men lurking without, I think!" Jackson exclaimed, abruptly, having been peering through the open window near which he stood. The windows of the apartment were modern French ones, extending to the floor, and thus affording easy access to the piazza without.

Dudley mistook Jackson's meaning. He did not think his jackal was in earnest, but imagined he was playing a part in order to frighten the girl.

"Quick! give me your hand, before it is too late!" he exclaimed, possessing himself of Janet's slender hand. "Now, then, justice, fire away as quickly as you can, and rattle through the ceremony before our anxious friends out yonder can get in and spoil the sport!"

"Oh, no, no! Do not! I cannot bring myself to consent to this!" Janet moaned, endeavoring to release her hand from Dudley's firm grasp, but he retained it firmly and passed his other hand caressingly around her waist.

"It is impossible to retreat now; we have gone too far; we must be married now, or else your good name will be ruined forever," he whispered in her ear. "Think how every one will speak if we are not married—we have been so much together. For the sake of your reputation you must consent!"

And while Dudley was whispering this the justice had commenced to perform the marriage ceremony, and in spite of Janet's remonstrances would have got to the end of the service had not a sudden interruption occurred.

Ever since Jackson's announcement that he thought he saw some one prowling in the garden, he had been most decidedly uneasy, and just as the justice got half-way through the service, and to the question if he took the maiden for his lawful wife, Dudley, in a firm voice, had responded "Yes," a cry of alarm came from the jackal's lips.

"The cops, by blazes!" he cried, and in the most unceremonious manner he made a bolt for the door, but as he flung it open he was startled by the apparition of a detective there with a leveled and cocked revolver, and at the same moment the chief of the New York police, accompanied by a squad of detectives, all with cocked revolvers, and the telegraph girl, now disguised as a messenger boy, entered the room through the windows!

"Surrender! The game is up!" cried the chief. "By what right do you dare to enter this house?" demanded Dudley, bold as brass, although he felt in his heart that all was lost.

"A warrant for your arrest, Mr. Almon Dudley, or whatever you call yourself, on a charge of abduction, preferred by this lady," and he pointed to the disguised telegraph girl.

"The charge is absurd!"

"Oh, no, it isn't; and you will not have to answer that charge alone, but a dozen others," the telegraph girl replied. "Ten years ago you induced me to fly from my father's house because you thought I was his heiress, but he disowned me and baffled you. Then you cruelly deserted me, but not until I had learned who and what you truly were, horse-thief, counterfeiter, confidence-man, bank-robber—everything that is bad. The State prisons of a dozen different States are waiting to receive you—the doors yawn wide open, and the only trouble will be to decide which State is most entitled to you, Almon Dudley, or Captain Raymond Richards as you used to be called!"

"A cry of horror came from the lips of Janet O'Dare and in dismay she retreated from Dudley's side.

"Raymond Richards—Captain Raymond Richards!" she exclaimed. "Can it be possible? Why, that is the name of the villain who enticed away my elder sister and almost broke my poor father's heart. To avoid the wretch he fled in the night and changed his name!"

"Great heavens!" cried the telegraph girl, trembling with agitation, "the ways of Providence are indeed inscrutable. Now I know why your face attracted me so strangely. When you were a little girl you were called Agnes and your father was named Thomas Dockall."

"Yes, yes! Oh, Mildred, my sister! I know you now!"

"And in another moment the two girls, thus strangely united after years of separation, were folded in each other's arms.

For an instant Dudley looked astounded; he had not had the slightest suspicion in regard to the relationship existing between the two girls, one of whom had been his victim, and the other only saved from the same fate by the bloodhound-like pursuit of the injured wife.

"Well, upon my word, this is as fine a little matinee as I ever witnessed! Quite romantic; make a capital drama or have instant popularity as a story in one of the ten-cent libraries," he remarked. "Well, I suppose the jig is up, as far as I am concerned, so if you'll put on the bracelets we'll be traveling!"

But this *sangfroid* was only a ruse to throw his captors off their guard, for the moment after he made a most determined effort to escape.

With the skill of a practiced boxer he knocked the detectives right and left, sprung through the open window, and would certainly have got off in the darkness but for a sentinel whom the chief had posted in the garden.

This man essayed to stop the fugitive, was knocked down, rose, drew his revolver and sent a fatal bullet straight into the body of the fleeing man.

Dudley stumbled and fell, groined and rolled over, and when the detectives reached his side he was dead.

He had prophesied truly; it was not yet morning, but he was out of the reach of the detectives—gone before the bar of the Judge from whose dread court there is no appeal.

A few words more and our tale is told.

When the Dailys attempted to take possession of the heiress they found the telegraph girl in the way, and so were glad to make terms.

The love that the young girl had felt for the dead scoundrel was but a distempered dream that soon passed away, and in time she learned to love the noble young foreman of the book-bindingery—Martin Walaker—who had not hesitated, for her sake, to shut himself up within gloomy prison walls.

Old Walaker found it convenient to go to Europe for a couple of years, just before the marriage took place, for, to do the man justice, he was heartily ashamed of the base part he had played.

The brave young woman, who had hunted the cunning rascal down, still attends to her duties, and although as pretty a girl as any man could ask for, has no lover. The irrepressible Willy Wool declares he is going to marry her when he gets big enough, and our heroine laughingly declares that when she does marry, to the messenger-boy will be given the hand of the Telegraph Girl.

THE END.

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